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Changing Landscapes:  
Norman Cornish and  
North East Regional Identity.

Leanne Bunn

January 2010



Changing Landscapes:  
Norman Cornish and  
North East Regional Identity.

Leanne Bunn

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the award of  
Doctor of Philosophy of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle.

Arts and Social Sciences.  
January 2010

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work.

Name

Signature

Date

## Abstract.

This thesis examines the work of the Durham pitman and artist Norman Cornish whilst analysing the economic and cultural climate which has promoted and sustained his career as a regional artist for over seventy years. Cornish's depiction of mining life remains widely acknowledged by regional patrons and the local media as an iconic representation of the distinctiveness of North East mining communities. The fact that his work continues to receive considerable media attention whilst maintaining a strong patronage within the region, promotes several issues relating to the understanding of regional culture and identity. Why has Cornish's work remained so enduringly popular and what does this reveal about the dynamics of North East regional culture?

This research considers the interpretation and patronage of Cornish's work during key periods of the region's development and in doing so provides the first sustained study of Cornish's career in relation to regional cultural identity. Industrialisation, economic change, concepts of community and nostalgia are all recognised as fundamental factors which have shaped the region's cultural identity during the twentieth century. Essentially, it is argued that a sense of 'Northernness' is crucial to Cornish's regional popularity. Significantly, this thesis identifies a variation between Cornish's regional and national popularity. The artist's strong local appeal has not been replicated consistently on a broader national level. It is suggested that the varying national interest in Cornish's career should be considered in relation to wider artistic trends as well as patronage from organisations such as the National Coal Board. On a regional level, a large proportion of Cornish's continued appeal to local audiences can be attributed to the sympathetic response from the regional media.

Whilst the study of regional identity within the scope of visual culture is by no means a new or impoverished field, this study adopts a thematic treatment of culture, identity and representation, in order to understand the contribution of visual culture to regional identity during the twentieth century. By dealing with visual culture in its broadest and most fluid sense, this study consults both social and cultural history sources alongside art historical perspectives.

Changing Landscapes:  
Norman Cornish  
and North East Regional Identity.



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Numerous people deserve recognition for their guidance and assistance however I would particularly like to thank Steve Tollervey from the British Film Institute and Imogen D. Townsend from the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield. I would like to express gratitude to my original principal supervisor Dr. Bill Lancaster who up until his retirement had been my tutor at undergraduate and postgraduate level. His knowledge and support over the years remain inspirational. Likewise, Dr. Natasha Vall, has provided support and advice for which I am immensely grateful. It is to Dr. Paul Usherwood and Dr. Ysanne Holt who perhaps deserve the greatest acknowledgment for 'inheriting' this research at such a late stage. I greatly appreciate their time, support and above all their encouragement.

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents Audrey and Jack who lived in a mining community not so dissimilar from that depicted by Norman Cornish.

## Abbreviations.

AIA Artists International Association  
BIAE British Institute of Adult Education  
CPGB National Communist Party of Great Britain  
CEMA Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art  
DUL Durham University Library  
LEA Local Education Authority  
NASU National Adult School Union  
NCB National Coal Board  
NCL Newcastle Central Library  
NUL Newcastle University Library  
PDC Peterlee Development Corporation  
PRS Pre-Raphaelite Society  
TNA The National Coal Board  
WPA Works Progress Administration

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## Introduction.

In a career that has spanned seven decades, Norman Cornish has established himself as a popular and commercially successful artist in his native North East England. Cornish's depictions of mining life, particularly those of his home town of Spennymoor, have significantly informed certain aspects of the North East's regional identity. Despite this, his work and reputation have yet to receive the systematic and critical examination which they undoubtedly deserve.

This thesis argues that throughout the twentieth century, Cornish's growing reputation as the 'Pitman Painter' and his representation of working class communities have proved particularly useful to various groups and organisations. Yet despite this, Cornish has failed to find critical favour with the established, London-centred art world. A certain local audience has responded more favourably, finding Cornish's supposed realism and authenticity appealing. Industrial decline within the region has added a further dimension to the wider reception of Cornish's work. For many his portrayal of Spennymoor represents a nostalgic view of a working class 'community' which they perceive to have been lost.

Consideration will be given to a variety of key factors which have helped establish Cornish as one of the region's most popular artists. The first is the Settlement Movement. The impact of chronic unemployment during the interwar years provided the impetus to develop non-residential settlements in which the working class could benefit from a liberal, cultural education. The inspiration for this drew heavily upon the residential settlements created in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the pioneer of which was Toynbee Hall established in 1884. Following in this tradition, a non-residential settlement was established at Spennymoor in 1932.

It was within the context of the Movement and the wider cultural aspirations to improve the educational standards of the region's workers, that Cornish was first able to demonstrate his artistic talent. Cornish's potential was quickly identified and the local press soon singled him out for attention. This in turn attracted the interest of

organisations such as the National Coal Board and Durham County Council.<sup>1</sup> Both utilised Cornish's work and reputation to influence public opinion by offering a consolatory myth in the face of economic decline and social change within the North East.



Figure 1  
Norman Cornish  
*Street with Horse and Cart*  
Oil on board

An effect of this has been to cement one of the dominant notions about North East identity. Cornish's representation of mining life is based on flat caps and whippets and it is this stereotypical view which has contributed to the wider image of the region. In reality, however, the North East includes all sorts of terrains and ways of life. The problem stretches beyond an issue of geography and is firmly situated within the cultural realm. As Colls and Lancaster recognised in their seminal work *Geordies*, 'local loyalties' are fierce within the region and are often neglected when definitions are considered.<sup>2</sup> This is rather a different point however and for the purposes of this study the North East includes Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham as well as the Tees Valley.<sup>3</sup> The latter area of Tees Valley obviously has a

<sup>1</sup> For convenience, the National Coal Board will now be referred to as the NCB.

<sup>2</sup> In the preface to the second edition, the authors acknowledge how the title of their book *Geordies* alienated a sizeable portion of the local population. Many readers, considered themselves to be part of the wider 'family' of the region, but found the description to be too specific to Tyneside. Colls, R. and Lancaster, B. (first published 1992, this edition 2005), *Geordies Roots of Regionalism*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> The region of the 'Tees Valley' is used in this definition of the North East, even though the title has yet to be fully embraced by the local population. In doing so, Tees Valley represents a larger area than traditionally included in Teesside, incorporating Middlesbrough, Stockton-on-Tees, Redcar and

different industrial character. These differences are however occasionally blurred by wider regional similarities in which Hartlepool's comic strip hero Andy Capp is often compared to Cornish's miner.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2  
Map of North East England.

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Cleveland, Hartlepool and Darlington. This 'greater Teesside' simply allows for a wider geographic location to be encompassed in the definition of the region.

<sup>4</sup> Middlesbrough in particular is most noted for its petro-chemical industry as opposed to Durham and Northumberland where mining was the dominant source of employment.

An interest in the concept of community can be identified in numerous academic, sociological and literary accounts published in the post-war period. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* are important examples of increased academic interest in working class community and culture.<sup>5</sup> Cornish's depiction of mining life presents Spennymoor as a 'traditional' mining community. The existence of such a community has been the subject of historical and sociological debate. Through an engagement with this wider debate, it is hoped to shed light on Cornish's understanding of community and the manner in which he depicts Spennymoor.

The mining community captured by Cornish is based upon the notions of solidarity and collective culture in which the uniqueness of pit work is central. This interpretation of a traditional mining community is one which is commonly upheld in many academic studies.<sup>6</sup> Barry Supple's volume in *The History of the British Coal Industry*, argues that the mining community was a 'web of identification' in which the pit influenced every aspect of life.<sup>7</sup> Studies such as *Mining and Social Change*, published in 1978, and edited by Martin Bulmer alongside Mark Benney's ethnographic work *Charity Main*, 1948, also support the existence of the homogeneous mining community.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly Cornish's 'realism' and commitment to the local scene was a factor which contributed to his local popularity. As early as 1949 the *Northern Despatch* referred to the 19<sup>th</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Festival as presenting the 'The Miner's Life on Canvas.' Cornish's work was particularly singled out for the way it provided a 'real impression of life in this district.'<sup>9</sup> The local press regarded Cornish's art as

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<sup>5</sup> Hoggart, R. (1957) *The Uses of Literacy, Aspects of Working Class Life*, London: Chatto and Windus. Williams, R. (1958) *Culture and Society*, London: Chatto and Windus.

<sup>6</sup> During the post-war years, several academic surveys focused upon working class communities in an attempt to elucidate the impact of economic change. In relation to mining communities one of the most significant of these works is the appropriately named sociological study *Coal is our Life*. Dennis, N. Henriques, F. Slaughter, C. (First published 1956, this edition 1969). *Coal is our Life, An Analysis of a Yorkshire Mining Community*, London: Tavistock publications.

<sup>7</sup> Supple, B. (1987) *The History of the British Coal Industry vol. 4, 1913-1946, The Political Economy of Decline*, Oxford: Clarendon.

<sup>8</sup> Bulmer, M. ed. (1978) *Mining and Social Change*, London: Croom Helm Ltd. Benney, M. (1948) *Charity Main: a coalfield Chronicle*, London: G. Allen and Unwin.

<sup>9</sup> *Northern Despatch*, 4<sup>th</sup> September, 1949.

‘ennobling’ the miner whilst bringing ‘new dignity to the daily toil.’<sup>10</sup> His depictions of Spennymoor were considered to be authentic and an emotionally sympathetic portrayal of working class life in the region.<sup>11</sup>

For metropolitan audiences, Cornish’s depiction of Spennymoor could for a time be regarded as contributing to the development of forms of realism in British art at a national level.<sup>12</sup> The ‘Battle for Realism’ marked one of the central topics of post-war artistic debate.<sup>13</sup> Regarded by some as a social realist, Cornish’s depiction of mining life and the heroism of his miners featured in three important national exhibitions during the 1950s. Of particular note was *The Mirror and the Square, An exhibition of Art ranging from Realism and Abstraction*, 1952. Organised by the Artists International Association and held at the New Burlington Galleries, this exhibition hoped to address the ‘prevailing controversy’ within post-war art.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, John Berger, one of the leading participants in the ‘battle of realism,’ was involved in its early organisation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite being hailed as one of the North East’s most important artists, Cornish has received relatively little academic attention. Those researchers who have commented on him have tended to focus upon his early artistic development at the expense of his later career. In doing so, significant aspects of his career have been omitted. In contrast, this thesis will consider Cornish’s career to the present day. Whilst the period 1950 to 1970 is often regarded as the most important in his career, this research seeks to understand the development of Cornish’s art before and beyond these years.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1959.

<sup>11</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1959.

<sup>12</sup> With regard to the wider post-war artistic debate surrounding realism and abstraction the following works are a selection of many which prove central to the discussion, Hyman, J. (2001) *The Battle for Realism, Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-1960*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. Garlake, M. ed. (2001) *Artists and Patrons in Post-war Britain*, London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. Harrison, C. (1981) *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, London and USA: Allen Lane/Indiana University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, J. (1956) ‘Exit and Credo?’ in *New Statesman*, Vol. 52, no. 1333, 26<sup>th</sup> September, p.372 quoted in Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, L. and Radford, R. (1983) *AIA The Story of the Artists International Association 1933-1953*, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> The three exhibitions were *The Coalminers: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Coalminers and Professional Artists*, AIA, 1950, *Realism in Contemporary Art: Paintings on the Life and Struggles of the Working Class produced by Northern Artists*, CPGB, 1951 and finally the AIA exhibition *The Mirror and the Square* which was held in 1952.

The work of Norman Cornish and indeed pitman painters has been relatively neglected by visual histories of the region. In the years that separate the studies by William Feaver and Natasha Vall, not one piece of sustained research has been produced which considers the work of pitman artists and how their contribution to visual culture has shaped the North East's regional identity.<sup>16</sup> Feaver's study focused upon the art of the Ashington Group. From this work, some interesting issues are raised in relation to authenticity and perception.<sup>17</sup>

Feaver's research is a useful starting point when considering the Ashington Group and contrasting artistic developments in the Durham mining town of Spennymoor. In Spennymoor, the founder and warden of the Settlement, William Farrell, can be seen to have an experiential attitude to the Sketching Club's work, preferring his students to develop their own style and subject matter. During the interwar years, Farrell had spent time at Toynbee Hall as an unemployed actor. This experience appears to have strengthened his liberal attitude to adult education.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Robert Lyon, Master of Painting at Armstrong College, Newcastle, was initially more instructional in his approach to art education.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Lyon attempted to control the Group's output by dictating the medium as well as the titles of work. He did not want the Group to become painters; he wanted them simply to appreciate the art of others.

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<sup>16</sup> Natasha Vall has published two articles on Norman Cornish, both of which focus mainly on the Spennymoor Settlement but briefly consider his career up until 1970. Vall, N. (2004) 'Bohemians and 'Pitman Painters' in North East England, 1930-1970' in *Visual Culture in Britain*, Volume 5, Number 1 pp.1-23. Vall, N. (2004) 'Cultural Improvers in North-East England, 1920-1960: Polishing the Pitmen' in *Northern History*, XLI, March, pp. 163-180.

<sup>17</sup> In 1938, Mass Observers came to Ashington to assess the suitability of the Group as subjects of future study. Feaver, W. (1988) *Pitman Painters: the Ashington Group 1934-1984*, London: Chatto and Windus, pp. 74-76.

<sup>18</sup> Having worked in various theatres, Farrell considered himself to be a constructive artist. Whilst spending time at Toynbee Hall, Farrell was requested to explore the possibility of establishing a Settlement at Spennymoor. His liberal approach to sketching classes allowed students to develop their own style and pursue their own subject matter. Farrell was keen to encourage Cornish to paint the industrial scene. However, he did not pressure other group members to do likewise. Herbert Dees and John Heslop produced very different work to Cornish and their watercolour landscapes captured the rural qualities of the Durham countryside. Nevertheless, such diversity was accepted and encouraged by Farrell.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Lyon was employed by the Ashington Group to provide formal tuition at their classes. Despite the original objectives of Lyon, he was later to admit that the Group led the content of the class. Feaver argues that the body of work which was produced by the Group far exceeded the original aims of Lyon. Feaver, *Pitman Painters*, pp. 20-24



Both Cornish and the Ashington Group produced work which engaged with the local scene. It was the influence of Farrell which distinguished Cornish from other local artists. Unlike Lyon's approach in Ashington, it was Farrell's teaching that enabled Cornish to acquire and develop skills of figure drawing, perspective and composition, all of which distinguished his work and marked him out as a competent artist. The Ashington Group, in contrast remained and became celebrated as 'primitive' or 'naive' artists.

The role of Farrell is a central point of discussion for Natasha Vall. Engaging with the work of Colin Campbell, Elizabeth Wilson and Jonathan Rose, Vall argues that the unique economic circumstances of Durham attracted the attention of middle class bohemians whose interest in poverty served as a creative process essential to their self-identification.<sup>20</sup> Arguing that this bohemian interest continued to be a feature of mining patronage beyond the post-war years, Vall regards the Spennymoor Settlement as marking the intersection between working class artists and middle class intellectuals. She suggests that the wide appeal of Cornish amongst both popular audiences and bohemian intellectuals, is central to understanding key processes of cultural change in the North East during the twentieth century, such as the transition from voluntary to state led 'cultural policy'.<sup>21</sup>

In Vall's account, the role of Farrell is central to the process as the warden is viewed as underlining the connection between middle class interest in working class life and the working classes artistic depiction of their own experiences. Vall regards the Settlement as a paradox in which attempts to draw the mining community out of itself elicited the opposite response.

This thesis offers a different interpretation of the Settlement, arguing that financial uncertainty was decisive in altering Farrell's attitude towards the commercial exploitation of his students. Actively seeking to sell the work of the sketching club within the region and in London, Farrell became almost an agent to

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<sup>20</sup> In her analysis Vall utilises the following works, Campbell, C. (1987) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Wilson, E. (1985) *Adorned in dreams: fashion and modernity*, London: Virago and finally Rose, J. (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British working classes*, London; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Vall, 'Bohemians', p.17. Vall, 'Cultural Improvers', p. 180.

the Spennymoor artists. Farrell was later described as the 'North's talent scout for arts,' suggesting that the warden's role came to extend beyond the amelioration of the effects of poverty and his own quest to find creative self-identity.<sup>22</sup>

John Harvey's study of miner artists in Wales during the twentieth century identified a wide consensus which viewed colliery life as an appropriate subject for a 'distinctively Welsh art.'<sup>23</sup> Harvey's research maintains however, that within Wales and more importantly within England, the impact of the mining aesthetic within twentieth century art is marginal.<sup>24</sup>

This thesis contests such a claim, arguing that within the North East, mining art and specifically the work of Norman Cornish, has been promoted widely through the local press and television, and has made a significant contribution to the development of regional identity. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, Cornish's art has retained a continual presence within the regional art market. Issue is also taken with Harvey's contention that miner art should carry an overt political content for it to be of cultural value. He argues that 'miner-art, like Christian grace, flourished best in adversity' and that denied these conditions 'it risks degenerating into chocolate-box conservatism.'<sup>25</sup> In many ways, Harvey regards mining art as a vehicle for miners to draw attention to their social plight and material deprivation. In claiming this, Harvey fails to recognise that even essentially conservative images of mining such as Cornish's can have a use.

This study examines some of the distinctions between the developments in art in the North East with that of Wales. In both locations, art produced by miners has played an integral role in the development of regional identity. The North East is distinguished however by a lengthy and continual interest in art produced by miners. This interest, which extended into the post-war period, was encouraged by the local media. As a result, an important aspect of the research underpinning this thesis has been a systematic search of the local press. This has revealed the unique position of

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<sup>22</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Harvey, J. (2000) *Miner-artists: the art of Welsh Coalworkers*, Aberystwyth: Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, p.10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10. The concept of such a mining aesthetic is considered in the first chapter.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

the local media in the North East.<sup>26</sup> As stated, the press were vital in promoting Cornish's art and cultivating his reputation as the supreme example of the 'Pitman Painter'.

Importantly, this thesis engages with the wider literature on the 'North' including Dave Russell's *Looking North*.<sup>27</sup> The front cover of this book features a charcoal and crayon drawing by Norman Cornish. The drawing comprises two cloth capped miners, leaning against a bar with a whippet by their feet (figure 3 *Dog Talk*). Aside from the cover of the book, the text does not make any mention of Cornish or his work. The fact that the image is included without any explanation is testimony to the assumed powerful symbolism of this drawing, the belief that it will be immediately identified as a 'typical' Northern scene. The way in which Cornish's work has come to be recognised and interpreted as a symbol of 'Northernness' is again highlighted as a crucial theme within this research.

The interwar depression inspired many writers, photographers and journalists to concentrate upon the working class community. As Alan Plater writes, 'In the 1930s and 1940s the perceived image of the North East was, in effect an angry essay by J.B Priestley illustrated by Bill Brandt's photographs, and probably published in *Picture Post*.'<sup>28</sup> Priestley's *English Journey* provided the blueprint for many negative interpretations of the North East since its publication in 1934.<sup>29</sup> Poverty, depression and the lack of any cultural standard are the basic features of this impressionistic and stereotypical account of the region.

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<sup>26</sup> Both John Harvey and Peter Lord utilise newspaper reports to gauge critical and popular response to mining art. The consistency in which the local media in the North East supports the work of miner artists is in contrast with events in Wales. The difference can in part be explained by the wider debate occurring within Wales regarding the nature and suitability of industrial art. Lord, P. (1998) *The Visual Culture of Wales, Industrial Society*, Cardiff: University of Wales.

<sup>27</sup> Russell, D. (2004) *Looking North. Northern England and the National Imagination*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Plater, A. (first published 1992, this edition 2005) 'The drama of the North' in Colls. R, and Lancaster. B, ed. *Geordies Roots of Regionalism*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Priestley, J.B.(1934) *English Journey*, London: Heineman and Gollancz. Ardagh, J. (1979) *A tale of five cities, Life in provincial Europe today*, London: Secker and Warburg.



Figure 3  
Norman Cornish  
*Dog Talk*  
Charcoal crayon on paper

This interpretation of 'Northernness' does not go unchallenged. From Chaplin to Colls, there have been a number of writers, who contest the negative portrayal of the region. Unlike these writers, Cornish has not consciously attempted to challenge unfavourable stereotypes of the North. His work, however, has been used to demonstrate the warmer side of mining life. Taken in this way Cornish can be read as a visual counterpart to Sid Chaplin (1916-1986) whose work attempted to counteract the generally negative view of the region with a version of 'Northernness' based upon community and solidarity.

The burgeoning interest in 'region' and 'regional identity' will be considered in the light of the work of prominent scholars such as Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster. Their pioneering work *Geordies: Roots of regionalism* first published in 1992, captured the emerging need to understand the region in terms of 'who we were, and where we had been.'<sup>30</sup> This was achieved through a collection of essays examining drama, sport, history, art and 'all the ways in which a people make a culture they can call their own.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Colls and Lancaster ed. *Geordies*, Preface to the second edition, p.viii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

Since then much academic research has focused upon the concept and development of regional identity often in the context of national affairs. More recent additions to this field of research include the essays in *An Agenda for Regional History and Regional identities in North East England*.<sup>32</sup> The latter includes a significant essay by Natasha Vall whose examination of Regionalism and Cultural History draws strong conclusions with regard to the role of the local media in promoting a sense of cultural cohesiveness within the region.<sup>33</sup> Further literature by authors such as John Tomaney and Gary Pattison consider the transitory nature of culture and the post-industrial restructuring which informed a large aspect of regional identity.<sup>34</sup>

The omission of regional art from many works which consider regional identity is a major failure to develop a unique and significant body of cultural evidence. This work, however, will draw on both popular and art historical perspectives to remedy what has been the critical neglect of an important cultural and scholarly resource. In terms of the North East, research into visual culture has predominantly but not exclusively focused upon the artistic developments of the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

Laura Newton's reappraisal of the colony of artists in the fishing village of Cullercoats highlights the hitherto marginalisation and neglect of artistic developments within the region.<sup>36</sup> Newton's study reveals interesting patterns in terms of regional portrayal and the development of identity, all of which lead to further questions relating to the changes in the regional art market in the following century. The study of Cornish's work reveals a complex system of art patronage both locally and nationally which has sustained the career of this former pitman-turned artist.

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<sup>32</sup> Lancaster, B. Newton, D and Vall, N ed. (2007) *An Agenda for Regional History*, Newcastle: Northumbria University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Vall, N. 'Regionalism and cultural history, The case of North-Eastern England, 1918-1976,' in Green, A and Pollard, A.J. ed. (2007) *Regional Identities in North East England, 1300-2000*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, chapter 8 pp.181-207.

<sup>34</sup> Tomaney, J and Ward, N. (2001) *A Region in Transition North East England at the Millennium*, Burlington : Ashgate. Pattison, G. (1999) *Restructuring Culture, Identification and the regulation of change in ex-mining communities*, Burlington: Ashgate.

<sup>35</sup> Exceptions to this include work such as Fawcett, H. ed. (2007) *Made in Newcastle, Visual Culture*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, and Faulkner, T.E. ed. (1996) *Northumbrian Panorama, Studies in the History and Culture of North East England*, London: Octavian.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Newton, (2001) *The Cullercoats artists' colony c1870-1914*, University of Northumbria, Unpublished PhD thesis.

Often the parallels between nineteenth and twentieth century artistic developments are striking, particularly in terms of the region's relationship with the metropolitan art market. In his article 'Art on the Margins from Bewick to Baltic,' Paul Usherwood has also demonstrated the complexities of the regional art market and its development in relation to London.<sup>37</sup> Some of these issues will be considered in the context of Cornish's career and reputation. Whilst at specific times, the artist may have enjoyed national exposure Cornish's success has largely relied upon local patronage. Likewise, the difficulty North East artists, writers as well as painters have encountered in capturing a national audience is exemplified by the unfavourable response of the metropolitan audience to Sid Chaplin and Alan Plater's play *Close the Coal House Door* in 1968. The play received widespread critical acclaim within the region but failed to resonate with London theatre goers.<sup>38</sup>

The origins of this thesis stemmed from a research opportunity offered by the University Gallery, Northumbria University. The internship was organised by gallery director and agent for Cornish, Mara-Helen Wood. Her motivation stemmed largely from what was the hitherto academic neglect of Cornish's art and career. Whilst this thesis aims to explore Cornish's work beyond the scope of existing research, the approach taken here has been thematic rather than strictly chronological. In doing so, key points of Cornish's career have been identified and contextualised not only within the unique cultural and social framework of a particular period, but also in light of wider cultural history and art history perspectives. By selecting particular events and considering the artist's career thematically, a greater appreciation of the differences between regional and national influences can be elucidated.

The scope of this research has required an inter-disciplinary approach, combining social and economic history within the wider parameters of visual cultural studies. The combination of such a variety of approaches and sources has been necessary in order to contextualise Cornish's career in line with regional and national

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<sup>37</sup> Usherwood, P. ( 2001) 'Art on the margins from Bewick to Baltic, in Colls, R. And Lancaster, B. ed. *Newcastle upon Tyne a Modern History*, Chichester: Phillimore, pp. 245-267.

<sup>38</sup> With music by Alex Glasgow the play considered the history of the mining industry in the region through a combination of comedy sketches and family drama. First shown to a Newcastle audience in 1968 the play was an unquestionable success within the region, yet failed to attract the same level of enthusiasm from a London audience.

events. The Cornish Archive held at the University Gallery includes an extensive image library and this has formed the foundation for research. This is also the first study of Cornish's complete career and art in relation to the wider debates which have characterised art history as well as social history within those years. Fully considering the time period of 1930-2009 within this research has been ambitious but considered essential in order to provide a complete analysis of the key events within the artist's career.

The Spennymoor Settlement Archive provided Natasha Vall with a range of evidence relating to the educational activities within the town. For the purposes of this research, that material has been re-examined and found to provide further insight into the development of community within Spennymoor. This new material is put to use in chapter two which examines the notion of 'community' and in chapter three where the wider cultural impact of Settlement activities is discussed. The British Library houses a vast collection of journals and material relating to the development of educational settlements both before and after the Second World War and many of these have also been consulted.

The Sid Chaplin Papers also form a substantial archival record of Chaplin's involvement at the Settlement as well as his later career working for the NCB.<sup>39</sup> These include a great deal of private correspondence, draft proposals for television and radio broadcasts as well as extensive newspaper reviews which reveal the importance of the media within his career. From this archive, evidence has been discovered which suggests Chaplin's appointment as a feature writer for *Coal* magazine and his later work as a public relations officer for the NCB undoubtedly raised Cornish's profile with the organisation.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The career of Sid Chaplin is of particular interest to this research, as at times it has directly influenced Cornish's success. The friendship between the two men was cemented by the fact that they had both been miners at the Dean and Chapter Colliery, whilst also attending the Spennymoor Settlement. Like Cornish, Chaplin was forced to pursue his creative interests in between mining shifts. After obtaining a scholarship at Fircroft College, Chaplin's literary talent was recognised when he won the Atlantic Book Award in 1946. Chaplin's later career as a Public Relations Officer for the NCB is of most significance. This aspect will be considered fully in chapter four.

<sup>40</sup> *Coal* was the official magazine published by the NCB from 1947.

Records belonging to the National Coal Board and in particular their Public Relations Branch have been consulted. Some of these documents were sourced locally at Durham County Records Office whilst others were viewed at the National Archives in Kew. When considered together, they provide a record of the aims and outlook of the NCB at a local and national level. Archive material relating to Durham County Council was consulted at Durham County Records Office. The minutes of Council meetings together with internal correspondence shed light on the motivation behind the Council's bold plans for regional rejuvenation.

The British Film Institute's extensive collection of social documentaries importantly includes the films produced by the NCB for *Mining Review*, in which Cornish featured in 1963.<sup>41</sup> The monthly cine-magazine provided an excellent insight into the NCB and their attempts to alter the perception of the mining industry. Social documentaries which consider the mining industry are an additional source of material from which important comparisons can be drawn.

The Cornish Archive provided a starting point from which to assess the media's response to Cornish's exhibitions and contribution to the development of his career and reputation. Whilst the Cornish Archive has a vast collection of press cuttings, the newspaper collections held at Newcastle's Local Studies Library as well as Darlington Library's Centre for Local Studies have also been utilised. In terms of gauging the regional appeal and interest in Cornish, the local media is the most useful source. Critical coverage of exhibitions, the development of Cornish's artistic reputation together with the media's fascination with the notion of the 'Painter Pitmen' can be analysed through an examination of the extensive coverage in the local media.

From extensive analysis of media coverage it is clear that the press consistently portrayed Cornish in a particular light. Interviews are dominated by the artist's quotes and certain stories are frequently repeated. In many ways Cornish directly influences his media portrayal and representation. Whilst interviewing

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<sup>41</sup> Where possible many of these documentaries have been viewed at screenonline. The particular volume in which Cornish features was viewed at the BFI's National Library, London.



Cornish on several occasions during the course of this research, it became apparent that the artist directed the conversation to include often quoted phrases and stories.

This personal interaction with the artist has led to some interesting conclusions which will be discussed within the thesis. From interviewing Cornish, it is clear that his own personal awareness of his image is acute. The cultivation of his reputation was a key factor which informed his relationship with the media. Cornish is portrayed as the 'pitman painter', a term which, it is argued, implies that there is a cultural contradiction in a miner also being an artist. The media has encouraged this portrayal of Cornish as a self-educated amateur artist-a naïf. This image belies an individual persona that has been cannily and to some extent self-consciously constructed- by the artist himself as well as by others.

During interviews it was not uncommon for Cornish to direct discussion away from certain topics, such as, for instance, the dissolution of his relationship with the Stone Gallery. He also avoids commenting on his relationship with other artists particularly Tom McGuinness and Lowry.<sup>42</sup> Such matters are conveniently glossed over in favour of preferred topics such as the Spennymoor Settlement. Whilst this can prove frustrating it is also suggestive of the extent to which Cornish has always played an instrumental role in his portrayal.

Consequently general interest in Cornish has been two-fold. Firstly his art has been regularly interpreted as presenting a realistic depiction of colliery life. As discussed, this interpretation presents North East Communities as being based upon warmth and solidarity. In the case of Cornish, particular significance is placed on the fact that the working classes are being depicted by a member of their own community. Cornish's position as an 'insider' within the community is deemed crucial to his success.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, there is the growth of Cornish's reputation as the pitman painter. His development as an artist has always proved equally as fascinating to the

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<sup>42</sup> This was suggested by Tilly Marshall owner of the Stone Gallery. *Inside Out –North East* Monday January 16 2006. Programme synopsis available at [www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northeast/series9/week\\_two.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northeast/series9/week_two.shtml), see also Marshall, T. (1981) *Life with Lowry*, London: Hutchinson, pp.39-40.

<sup>43</sup> This point was particularly emphasised by Cornish's Stone Gallery agents Ronald and Tilly Marshall and was taken up frequently by the local press to emphasise the legitimacy and authority in which Cornish depicted the mining scene.

media. Of particular interest is the time Cornish spent at the Settlement during the Depression. This can partly be attributed to the sustained academic and journalistic interest in the region's interwar history. Indeed, the sense of community which is often associated with Cornish's work finds its origins within the 'hardship' of the Depression years.

Each chapter examines a particular theme within Cornish's career. The first chapter serves to introduce some of the key aspects relating to Cornish's subject matter, stylistic development and artistic influences. This will be the first opportunity to discuss Cornish as a social realist. However, the theme will be re-visited throughout the study. More recently Cornish's work has been situated under the umbrella term of 'Mining Art'.<sup>44</sup> Chapter one discusses the difficulties that this term brings in as much as it unites both professional and amateur artists. The degree to which 'Mining Art' can be considered a distinct genre requires careful consideration.

The concept of 'community' is addressed in chapter two. The study here relies heavily on the numerous post-war social surveys conducted within mining communities. It attempts to draw together the common assumptions which contribute to the notion and existence of a shared collective culture within the 'traditional' working class community.<sup>45</sup> Whilst this chapter does not intend to prove or disprove that such a community exists, it does maintain that its perceived existence is crucial to the success of Cornish's art. Cornish's own portrayal of community is shown to support the wider assumptions of the homogeneous pit community where communal life and culture were directly influenced by the pit.

The particular strand of the Spennymoor Settlement's work known popularly as the 'The Pitman's Academy' provides the focus for chapter three. The themes of

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<sup>44</sup> In relation to recent works which stake claim for a genre of 'mining art,' see McManners, R. and Wales, G. (2002) *Shafts of Light, Mining Art in the Great Northern Coalfield*, Gemini Productions, as well as Townsend, I. D. (2005) *Coal Faces Mining Lives. Portraits of an industry and its people*, The National Mining Museum for England Trust Ltd.

<sup>45</sup> For examples of the emphasis placed upon identifying a collective culture in mining communities see Williamson, B. (1982) *Class, Culture and Community, A Biographical Study of Social Change in Mining*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Supple, B. *The History of the British Coal Industry* vol. 4, Bulmer, M. ed., *Mining and Social Change*, Benney, M. *Charity Main*, as well as Critcher, C. Waddington, D. and Wykes, M. (1991) *Split at the Seams? Community, Continuity, and Change After the 1984-5 Coal Dispute*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

cultural education and the uses of art which characterised educational debate during the Depression and after are considered alongside the then current notion that the aesthetic taste of the working class needed to be moulded and guided by organising bodies. The role of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art (the ancestor of the Arts Council) established in 1940 was central in bringing art to the masses.<sup>46</sup> CEMA touring exhibitions which visited the Spennymoor Settlement were influential in introducing to its members the work of successful and recognised artists. The role of William Farrell as a tutor as well as promoter of Cornish's work is examined in terms of the ethics and influence he exercised over Cornish's career. The work of Sketching Club members will be considered as a group in order to elucidate thematic trends in their work as well as the development of Cornish as an individual.

Chapter four is the first chapter to consider Cornish's post-war career. Following the nationalisation of the industry in 1947, the National Coal Board desperately needed to improve external perceptions of the industry as well as improving its relations with its workers. The development of an arts policy was one way through which it sought to improve its image. From an early stage, Cornish was regularly promoted through exhibitions, sales and the granting of leave which enabled the artist to complete commissions such the Durham Gala Mural. This chapter considers how and why Cornish was used in this way. It also considers the NCB's interest in other miner artists.

In the case of the NCB's patronage, it is argued that their interest in Cornish lay less with the interpretation or valuation of his art than the artist's image: he was a self-educated, articulate and artistically talented miner. His continued loyalty to pit work despite finding significant regional success undoubtedly assisted the profile of an industry which was struggling to recruit new workers.

The Durham Gala mural provides the focus for chapter five. The fundamental changes within the region's economic and social structure help to explain the increased attention given to the artist during this period. This chapter particularly

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<sup>46</sup> From now on the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art will be shortened to CEMA. By 1946, CEMA had been incorporated into the Arts Council.

focuses on Cornish's largest and most significant commission; his mural depicting the Durham Gala, commissioned by Durham County Council for the newly built County Hall in 1963. The building was designed to showcase the Council's bold new ambitions for the future of the County which included the marginalisation of certain mining settlements in favour of new town investment. Cornish's commitment to depicting the traditional mining community would appear to have made him a surprising choice for the commission as his scenes of Spennymoor contrasted sharply with the Council's plans for regeneration.

Chapter six focuses upon the decade 1959-1969 in which Cornish was a regular exhibitor at Newcastle's Stone Gallery. The directors of the gallery Tilly and Ronald Marshall became Cornish's first agent in 1959. This particular phase in Cornish's career has been singled out for significant analysis. It is a period which highlights his growing regional reputation and also his commitment to becoming a full time professional artist in 1966. In addition, through his association with the Stone Gallery, Cornish met several high profile artists, significantly L. S. Lowry. The two artists were often compared because of their commitment to the Northern scene and on numerous occasions were shown together in group exhibitions held at the gallery. Perhaps the most significant of these was the 1966 exhibition *Painters of the North, The Ambience of the North* which aimed to capitalise on the burgeoning interest in the region,

A subsidiary function of this exhibition is an attempt to determine if the North really exists beyond its geographical location; whether it has an ambience sufficiently different from that of the rest of the England to justify the evangelical fervour of the northern creed.<sup>47</sup>

Cornish's exhibitions at the gallery were sell-out events, often accompanied by television documentaries and extensive, glowing press reviews. Through an analysis of these exhibitions and the media response to them, it is possible to draw distinct conclusions as to why Cornish attracted such a positive reaction from the local public. Of central importance it is argued, is the fact, that his work supposedly captures a sense of 'Northernness.' However, one art critic, William Varley, was

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<sup>47</sup> Marshall, R. (Summer 1966) *Painters of the North, The Ambience of the North*, Stone Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.

particularly critical of Cornish's success, claiming his work was popular because it was a 'visual token' of regional pride.<sup>48</sup> Varley's perceptive points are compared and contrasted with the overwhelming consensus of support from the local media.

The final chapter considers the way in which the media has presented the reputation of Cornish and the story behind his success. It considers the underlying tension contained in the title of 'pitman painter'. By the 1970s Cornish increasingly objected to its implied meaning. The way in which Cornish cultivated his own reputation is key to this discussion. As discovered personally, the artist attempts to control the direction of interviews. This has resulted in him being portrayed in a certain consistent manner. This and his generosity to the media in terms of time, accessibility and 'quotability,' ensures he is the region's best known miner artist. The 'mediatisation' of Cornish has been a collaborative process with the artist playing equally as large a role as journalists.

The latter part of Cornish's career replicates some of the previously identified patterns of patronage. His association with the University Gallery at Northumbria University since 1989 mirrors the level of exposure and local support which Cornish experienced during his earlier association with the Stone Gallery. Significantly, Cornish makes no artistic acknowledgement of the pit closures, strikes and overall decline of the industry during the 1970s and 1980s. This is in contrast to Tom McGuinness, who at this time incorporates themes of disaster, decline and strike within his art. In doing so he directly tackles the problems of the industry, the demoralisation experienced by mining communities and the bitter political struggles, all of which are absent from Cornish's work.

Even though Cornish rarely dates his work, it is clear that his refusal to consider aspects of decline within the industry has affected the way it is received. Instead he aligns his art with an earlier period when community in its traditional sense was still in existence. The omission of political comment from his art has in this sense been of benefit to Cornish. The local press, as they did in the 1960s

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<sup>48</sup> William Varley is an art critic, journalist and writer. He questioned the motivation behind Cornish's popularity in several articles printed in the *Journal* and the *Guardian* during the 1960s.

consistently regard his work as epitomising a sense of 'Northernness'. Certainly his work captures a sense of local pride associated with the region's industrial heritage.

As Cornish approached his ninetieth birthday in November 2009 the University Gallery held an exhibition to mark the occasion. For the past twenty years the artist has regularly featured in the Gallery's exhibition programme. These exhibitions are marked invariably by the interest of the local press, higher than average attendance figures and most importantly commercial success. The continued success of exhibitions is a clear indication of Cornish's enduring popularity.

In considering Cornish's continued popularity this thesis engages with key themes in the formation of regional identity whilst also exploring the contribution of visual art to the cultural development of the North East. Any consideration of Cornish's regional appeal should also acknowledge his limited national success. At specific points and in particular ways, his art has attracted a wider interest from beyond the region, yet despite this, Cornish has failed to cement a national reputation in the same way that Lowry has. The wider implications of Cornish's local success point to interesting conclusions with regard to regional artists, their national appeal and the construction of identity.



Figure 4  
Artist with Self portrait  
Photograph.

# Chapter one

## Norman Cornish and 'Mining Art.'



## Norman Cornish and ‘Mining Art’.

In Douglas Gray’s introduction to *Coal: British Mining in Art*, published in 1983, the author describes the marriage of art and coal as ‘incongruous and unsympathetic.’<sup>1</sup> Despite being an unlikely pairing, artists have found the mining landscape compelling. Norman Cornish is no exception; as an artist he has found a wealth of material in the mining town of Spennymoor. What distinguishes Cornish, along with a range of other artists who have depicted the coalfield within their work, was the fact that he was also a miner. During the first half of the twentieth century the emergence of ‘Pitman Painters’ marked a distinct phase in the artistic depiction of mining. This chapter will consider the emergence of miner artists in Wales and the North East. More recently Cornish has been situated under the umbrella term of ‘mining art.’ The development of this so-called genre has evolved as a response to events in the twentieth century in which unique social conditions encouraged miners to engage with the visual representation of their community. As will be discussed, the use of this ‘genre’ is problematic especially in relation to questions surrounding naivety and authenticity. These issues take on greater significance when considering that at various points Cornish’s perceived realism has meant his work has contributed to wider artistic debates within British art. The depiction of Cornish as a naïf, operating in cultural isolation, is challenged by an examination of the wider influences discernable within his art.

### **Mining in Art.**

The exhibition *Coal: British Mining in Art*, demonstrated the range of artists who had, over the centuries, depicted the mining scene within their

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction by Gray, D. (1982) *Coal: British Mining in Art, 1680-1980*. An exhibition organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain with the National Coal Board and supported by Barclays Bank. Notably Norman Cornish was omitted from this touring exhibition. Other North East miner artists, such as McGuinness as well as several Ashington painters were included. Cornish’s omission is surprising especially as NCB records clearly testify to the possession of several Cornish works as late as 1990 see Records Management, ‘Works of Art Mr Norman Cornish, 1990’, The National Archives (TNA) COAL30/515. This unpublished document does not provide the titles of the pieces but refers to the restoration and cleaning of two Cornish images. Appendix III also details the works held by the NCB in their collection. The role of the NCB as an arts patron will be considered in more depth in chapter four.



work. Organised by the National Coal Board, the exhibition loaned art from various private and public collections to represent 300 years of mining imagery. Work included within the exhibition was thematically grouped together under various headings such as 'The Mining Community' or 'The Landscape Underground'. One image included in the exhibition was Peter Hartover's panoramic landscape of seventeenth century Durham *Coal Staithes on the River Wear and Lumley Castle in the distance*, 1680 (figure 5). This work has been described as the first artistic depiction of the Industrial Revolution within Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Like the work of François Vivares, in the following century, Hartover depicted the industrial workings, machines and smoke as minor features within a landscape of rolling fields and country houses. The mining community depicted by Vivares was the Shropshire village of Coalbrookdale, a place which from the 1750s to the turn of the century, was to act as a magnet for artists, painters and poets. Such individuals, came to marvel at industrial modernity, finding it both repulsive and fascinating at the same time.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 5  
Peter Hartover  
*Coal Staithes on the River Wear and Lumley Castle in the distance* 1680,  
Oil on canvas.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, *Coal: British Mining in Art*, p. 56. Klingender, D. (1968 revised edition) *Art and the Industrial revolution*, Chatham: Evelyn Adams and Mckay. Downing, T. (1983) 'Coalmining and art' *History Today*, Volume 33 Issue 4, April, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> The first industrial pictures to be exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1778 were by the artist William Williams and depicted the coal industry of Coalbrookdale. It has been argued, however, that the first true depiction of industrial life shown at the Academy was Henry Perlee Parker's *Pitmen at Play*, 1836, see Townsend, *Coal Faces, Mining Lives*, p. 10-11.

By 1800, artists continued to portray mining as an industry which barely impinged upon the green fields of rural England. The presentation of a sanitised coal industry was a direct response to the demands of middle class patronage. Depictions of working class life were common. However, their conservatism accounted for nineteenth century middle class taste. Dars and Lucie-Smith argue that

The feelings that give the paintings their effect are middle-class feeling, and the motivating force that produced them had more to do with middle-class conscience and middle-class curiosity than it did with the indignation of those who found themselves oppressed.<sup>4</sup>

Jack Reading describes how 'In nineteenth century British art, industry was always on the other side of the hill. No-one was prepared to go over that hill.'<sup>5</sup>

During this period, the validity of coal mining as an appropriate subject matter was increasingly discussed. Painted in 1835, Turner's *Keelmen heaving in Coals by Moonlight* represented the power, success and emotion of the mining scene (figure 6). Criticism of the work focused upon the combining of coal and aesthetics. Danahay argues that the rejection of coal in artistic terms was a response to contemporary aesthetic theories. The 'sublime' was conventionally associated with awesome natural scenery as typified in John Martin's epic and occasionally biblical art.<sup>6</sup> The *Literary Gazette*'s response to Turner's work summarised current artistic thought. Critics appeared indignant over 'a flood of glorious moonlight wasted upon dingy coal-whippers, instead of conducting lovers to the appropriate bower.'<sup>7</sup> For some, Turner's painting had evidently violated the divide between aesthetics and industry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lucie-Smith, E. and Dars, C. (1977) *Work and Struggle The painter as witness 1870-1914*, London: Paddington Press, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Reading quoted in McManners and Wales, *Shafts of Light*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Danahay, M.A, 'The aesthetics of coal, Representing soot, dust and smoke in nineteenth century Britain' in Thesing, W.B. ed. (2001) *Caverns of Night, Coal Mines in Art, Literature and Film*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *The Literary Gazette*, 1835, quoted in Lucie-Smith and Dars, *Work and Struggle*, p. 31.

Gage, J. (2000) *Colour and meaning: art, science and symbolism*, London: Thames Hudson.

<sup>8</sup> Danahay, 'The Aesthetics of coal', p. 5

The importance of industry within the region is demonstrated by its increasing inclusion within artistic depictions. Most notable was the nineteenth century coal trade of Newcastle, which became increasingly popular to established artists of the region such as Thomas Bewick (1753-1828). His vignettes and engravings of working life in the region provide a historical record of miners and their families. Likewise, the etchings of Thomas Harrison Hair (1781-1855) represented the colliery scene without sentimentality and can be contrasted to the paintings of Henry Perlee Parker (1795-1873) who presented a highly romanticised view of mining life.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6  
Joseph Mallord William Turner  
*Keelman Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835  
Oil on canvas.

The artistic depictions of industry during this century reflected the cultural and social shifts in representation and perception of the region. Paul Usherwood regards the 1860s as key, arguing that from this point on, industry was regarded as the determining factor in the region's identity. Usherwood argues that at this moment, Newcastle begins to be self-conscious about its

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<sup>9</sup> McManners and Wales, *Shafts of Light*, p. 28-29. The illustrated press often utilised the etchings of Newcastle born Thomas Hair to demonstrate particular aspects of mining life. The interest in mining is demonstrated by the fact that the *Illustrated London News*, created in 1842, had within its first 11 years published twenty engravings showing seven mining disasters. Townsend, *Coal Faces*, p. 12, 18. It is interesting to note that amongst Parker's patrons were leading regional industrialists such as Charles Brandling, John Buddle and Mathais Dunn.

place in the world.<sup>10</sup> William Bell Scott's allegorical painting *Iron and Coal*, 1855-1860, is central to Usherwood's argument. The work can be seen as bringing together a vast range of typical industrial activity all of which was considered representative of Tyneside's economy. The link established here between industry and regional identity is a key factor which influences the local popularity of Cornish's art.

In recent years authors such as Imogen Townsend, Gillian Wales and Robert McManners have combined various mining depictions into a broader category of 'mining art' and have made claims for it to be recognised as a distinct genre. The so-called genre of 'mining art' is problematic. This broad term encapsulates artists from several different schools, periods and often bridges the divide between the amateur and the professional. The art historian Elizabeth Conran raises issues with regard to the quality of 'mining art',

I have had some resistance in the past to 'mining art', stemming from the uncritical attitude which surrounds it. There's a very loyal northern view that if it's a mining subject, it must be worthy, compounded by a 'post Ashington Group' view, that all mining art is produced by talented Sunday painter miners, and so, even worthier still. In the context of national and international art, it makes mining art look like a poor provincial backwater.<sup>11</sup>

In this quote Conran discusses the issues surrounding 'mining art' and the wider perception of its amateur status. In contrast McManners and Wales are keen to stress the wider contribution of 'mining art' within art history,

Mining Art cannot be dismissed as mere genre painting. Amongst its practitioners are artists of the finest technical skill and greatest artistic ability. Within the corpus of mining art is genuine fine art of the highest quality with an emotional power, a creative integrity and an artistic importance to rival the greatest twentieth century British art.<sup>12</sup>

There are of course problems with this definition too. To begin with their dismissal of 'mere genre painting' is at odds with the important challenge it

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<sup>10</sup> Usherwood, 'Art on the Margins', p. 253.

<sup>11</sup> Conran, E. Foreword to McManners and Wales, (2006) *McGuinness Interpreting the art of Tom McGuinness*, Gemini Productions, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> McManners and Wales, *Shafts of Light*, p. 233-234.

posed to history painting and the ensuing debate surrounding the artistic worth of 'everyday life'.<sup>13</sup>

The emergence of self-taught miner artists in the twentieth century, is a major factor behind the need to establish the position of 'mining art.' Clearly commentators such as McManners and Wales are anxious to distinguish some miner artists by their production of high quality art. Certainly this study regards the emergence of miner artists in the twentieth century as a distinct development, unique to the cultural and social conditions of the time. However, to use such a broad term as 'mining art' is misleading and raises more questions than it answers. It is more useful to consider why and how artists have engaged with the mining scene at different points in time. Likewise, it would be incorrect to assume that the miner artists who emerged in the twentieth century shared a common outlook in their approach to the mining scene.

In their analysis, McManners and Wales do raise important points surrounding the naivety of miner artists. Naive or primitive artists are often understood to be unsophisticated in their approach to art whilst also lacking knowledge of wider artistic trends. Yet, as is the case with many miner artists they can also display 'modes of operating' which appear highly sophisticated. McManners and Wales prefer not to use the term 'primitive' with regard to 'mining art' regarding it as insulting. 'Naive' they argue is a better term as it does suggest a 'raw ethnicity' which they identify in the work of the Ashington Group. *Ashington Colliery*, (figure 7) is one example of the quality of work produced by members of the Ashington Group. They claim 'other art of the mining genre' can be viewed independently depending on its level of sophistication. By describing the work of naive artists and using terms such as

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<sup>13</sup> The challenge to history painting was a major aspect of European art from as early as the sixteenth century. In eighteenth century Britain, the debate was lively. Artists such as Joshua Reynolds aspired to the Grand Manner. However, at the same time, William Hogarth wanted to raise the status of genre painting arguing that painters never refer to the 'intermediate species of subject between the sublime and the grotesque.' Hogarth quoted in 'Genre' *Grove Dictionary of Art*, p. 293. The dismissal of 'mere genre painting' by McManners and Wales appears all the more bizarre when considering the influence of notable genre painters on miner artists particularly nineteenth century French genre painters such as Gustave Courbet and François Millet.

'raw ethnicity' McManners and Wales also suggest a degree of inherent authenticity.

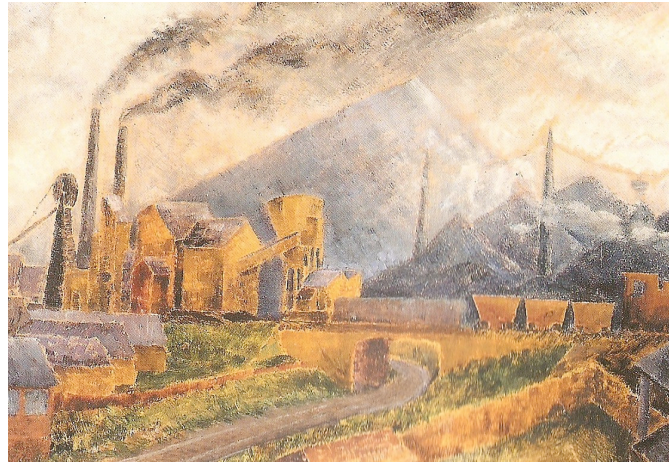


Figure 7  
Harry Wilson  
Ashington Colliery 1936  
Oil

Certainly, there is an established link between naivety and authenticity. Those artists, whose work is organic and without external influence, are deemed to present an original and unique response to their environment. The work produced by the Ashington Group and the Spennymoor artists was regarded as both naive and authentic for several reasons. They were self-taught amateurs, who were perceived to be untouched by wider artistic trends and debates. For many reasons, all of which will be discussed throughout the course of this thesis, presenting Cornish as a naïf reduces the obvious external artistic and cultural influences which are discernable in his work. Without this wider knowledge, it would have been impossible for the artist to achieve the level of sophistication he often displays. Likewise, Cornish's self-management is very astute, demonstrating a considered approach towards both the depiction of his subject matter and his popular image.

Nevertheless, many observers and academics have been keen to stress the naivety of miner artists as a means of emphasising their authenticity. A theme consistently re-iterated in the work of McManners, Wales and Feaver is the cultural isolation and subsequent naivety of miner artists. Likewise Vall notes a similar response in Spennymoor 'where

successive attempts to draw the mining community out of itself elicited a cultural response that, arguably, reinforced the idea of social homogeneity.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Cornish, it was the warden William Farrell who encouraged the artist to depict the mining scene.<sup>15</sup> Without doubt, Cornish produced work which as Vall argues 'reinforced' ideas of social homogeneity. As chapter two demonstrates the mining community was often regarded as a cultural monolith where patterns of life were traditionally collective. Nevertheless, Cornish's depiction of the mining scene could also be seen to reflect national debates surrounding realism in art. Similarly in media interviews Cornish demonstrated he was very much aware of artistic debates, styles and genres and as a result the influence of artists such as Van Gogh, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec and Lowry are all discernable within his work.

The degree of isolation in which miner artists worked is also brought into question by the work of Tony Baker.<sup>16</sup> The patronage of the wealthy art collector Helen Sutherland brought the Ashington Group into contact with wider artistic developments and progressive intellectuals. The Spennymoor Settlement provides a pertinent example of the direct contact made between miner artists and professionals such as Tisa Hess and Jos Thain of the Bauhaus, both of whom spent time tutoring and working alongside the Sketching Club members.

Both the Welsh and North Eastern coalfields welcomed an increasing number of émigré artists as a result of events in Europe. Writing with regard to the impact of the Polish émigré Josef Herman in Wales, Eric Rowan writes,

Once there, they enlivened and disturbed the artistic life of the post-war years, for they brought a direct European influence to their adoptive country,

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<sup>14</sup> Vall, 'Cultural improvers in England' p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Norman Cornish and Tom McGuinness were the two most prominent artists to emerge from the Spennymoor Settlement's Sketching Club. McGuinness's mining career began when he was conscripted as a Bevin boy in 1944. The warden of the Settlement, William Farrell, offered both men similar advice and directed them towards painting and drawing the community they lived in.

<sup>16</sup> Baker, T., (2004) 'A Kind of Prolonged Retreat: Helen Sutherland of Rock Hall' in *Northern Review, A Journal of regional and Cultural affairs*, Volume 14, p.25.

challenging the Welsh synthesis of modern styles and exerting a strong influence on some of the younger artists.<sup>17</sup>

Herman's stay in Wales ended in 1955, yet the experience for him had been motivated by his powerful and emotive needs as an artist.<sup>18</sup> It was a self-imposed exile in which he was able to subsume himself within the culture and heritage of Welsh mining life. Herman recorded this emotion in *Related Twilights. Notes from an artist's diary*. 'This image of the miners on the bridge against that glowing sky mystified me for years with its mixture of sadness and grandeur, and it became the source of my work for years to come.'<sup>19</sup>

The earlier experience of Tisa Hess at the Spennymoor Settlement carries parallels with that of Herman in Wales. Like Herman, the need to experience something new provided the motive behind Hess's arrival in County Durham. Countess Elisabeth von der Schulenberg was a Prussian émigré who came to Spennymoor in 1936 to teach at the Settlement.<sup>20</sup> Hess's motives for staying in County Durham were formulated around her interest in poverty. The cultural exchange between artist and their new environment provided ample visual inspiration. For Hess and Herman, their experiences within mining communities had both a profound and lasting impact upon their art and the experience served to justify their self-imposed exile. For the mining communities, these artists brought with them knowledge of wider artistic trends as well as the obvious links to influential groups such as the Artists International Association. As will be discussed, both Cornish and the Ashington Group benefitted from opportunities to exhibit in national AIA exhibitions.

Exhibitions organised by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art and the British Institute of Adult Education also offered opportunities

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<sup>17</sup> Rowan, E. (1985) *Art in Wales, An Illustrated History 1850-1980*, Welsh Arts Council, Cardiff :University of Wales Press, p.120.

<sup>18</sup> Heller, R. (1988) *Josef Herman, The Work is the Life*, Great Britain: Momentum p.48-52.

<sup>19</sup> Herman, J. (1975) *Related Twilights Notes from an artist's diary*, Great Britain: Robson Books, p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, M.(2005) *The Artists of Northumbria : an illustrated dictionary of Northumberland, Newcastle upon Tyne, Durham and North East Yorkshire painters, sculptors, engravers, stained glass designers, illustrators, caricaturists and cartoonists born between 1625 and 1950*, Bristol: Art Dictionaries, pp 298-299.



for working class artists to exhibit their work whilst also gaining exposure to critically accepted works of art. In the 1940s and 1950s Cornish was able to exhibit regularly at the Laing Art Gallery's Artist's of the Northern Counties exhibitions, whilst he was also included in national NCB exhibitions as well as those organised by the Artists International Association. To describe Cornish as being naive in terms of limited outside influence would fail to consider the multitude of external factors he was subjected to.

William Feaver's study of the Northumberland artists, known collectively as the Ashington Group, published in 1988 was titled *The Pitmen Painters*. This work marked the first piece of sustained academic interest in art produced by miners. The phrase 'pitmen painter' was first used by the North East press in the early 1930s in relation to artistic developments occurring in Ashington, Northumberland and Spennymoor, Durham. The phrase was later widened to refer to the Spennymoor Settlement as the 'Pitman's Academy'. The term 'pitmen painter' has since been applied liberally as a convenient label to describe miner artists.

Variations of the term have been used at earlier points by both the media and popular audiences. In 1904 the *Evening Express* published a drawing by A. Dunn which depicted a trumpeting angel and reflected the current religious revival within Wales. The newspaper revealed Dunn to be a 'young Welsh miner.' This event according to John Harvey marks the herald of miners' art.<sup>21</sup> Some years later in 1923, writing in *The Colliery Workers' Magazine*, Thomas Richards made reference to 'Mining...Painters' whose artistic endeavours would be used to illustrate future issues.<sup>22</sup> These early Welsh examples, however, are predated by the use of a similar phrase in relation to Tommy Armstrong, (1848-1920), who was born in Shotley Bridge, County Durham. Armstrong was affectionately known as the 'pitman poet' and his verses reflected significant events within the mining community such as pit disasters or strikes. Commenting on his role as the colliery chronicler, Armstrong is reported to have said,

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<sup>21</sup> Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.,

When ye're the Pitman's poet an' looked up to for it, wey, if a disaster or a strike goos wi'oot a sang fre ye, they say: "What's wi' Tommy Armstrong? Has someone druv a spigot in him and let oot aal the inspiration?" Me aud sangs hev kept me in beer an' the floor o' the public bar has bin me stage for forty year. Aw'd drink, aw'd sing, we'd drink agen, sangs wi'oot end, amen.<sup>23</sup>

The phrase 'Pitmen Painter' carries a similar sense of endearment. However, it also suggests a degree of contradiction. That a pitman should paint and be successful at it went against the grain of intellectual thought in the 1930s and subsequent decades. Harvey highlights the importance of pitmen painters as exposing 'the myth of the miner as a black, brutish, anonymous figure, whose lot was only muck and toil from the cradle to the grave.'<sup>24</sup> In some respects, however, the term reinforces wider assumptions about the naivety of these artists who as a result of their occupation are deemed to be primitive Sunday painters.

### **Twentieth Century 'Pitmen Painters'.**

Geography played an important part within the development of twentieth century miner art. The North-East and Wales share similar stories of miners who took up painting as a hobby or as part of an adult education programme. That these two geographic locations were at the forefront of developments in miner art may not seem surprising given that they were the largest and most productive coalfields within Britain. Both regions boast a strong mining heritage which is incorporated as key elements in their respective regional or national identity. Whilst miner artists did emerge in the North East and Wales, the pattern and development of this body of art occurred independently from one another. Within Wales, the emergence of the miner artist occurred in the period following the First World War whilst in the North East, the Ashington Group and the Spennymoor artists became known as a result of educational interventions during the interwar Depression. The unique social and intellectual circumstances at each of these times will be

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<sup>23</sup> The Tommy Armstrong Society at <http://www.pitmanpoet.derwentside.org.uk/TommyArmstrong/TommyArmstrong.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p. 2.

used to explain the divergence in the appearance and reception of miner artists in Wales and the North East.

In the years following the First World War, Wales witnessed the emergence of three artists who stemmed from working class backgrounds. Vincent Evans, Evan Walters and Archie Rhys Griffiths were a trio of artists whose work focused mainly upon the depiction of the Welsh mining community (figure 8 *In the Pit* ). Several factors allowed them to pursue professional art careers namely their ability to obtain scholarships in order to attend the Swansea School of Art.<sup>25</sup>

Within Wales a paternalistic approach towards educating the working classes had been present from as early as the 1860s. This progressive outlook manifested itself in the opening of exhibitions which directly encouraged working class interest. The Ruthin Eisteddfod of 1868 was featured in the *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*,

We trust therefore, that the people of Wales, the intelligent and ingenious artisans, the large portion of the population employed as colliers, miners and slate quarrymen, in this, the sister and neighbouring counties of North Wales, will be enabled to visit the exhibition before it closes. We hope it will not be necessary to complain of a neglect of duty of employers of labour to send men to this exhibition...<sup>26</sup>

Welsh intellectuals sought to improve the artistic taste of the working classes through exposure to fine art in the same way that educationalists in Britain were to do in the 1930s and 1940s. The deficiency of art education and the appalling living conditions of those in the artistic centres were topics which were frequently raised at the Eisteddfods.

Lord argues that by the 1880s there were vast opportunities for the Welsh working class to view art. Lord highlights Cardiff for its advanced

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<sup>25</sup> Lord, *Art in Industrial Wales*, p. 174

<sup>26</sup> *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 8 October 1868 in Lord, *Art in industrial Wales*, p. 114. The exhibition still maintained a degree of class distinction by increasing entry prices on certain days to ensure a more affluent clientele.

position in the provision of museums and galleries.<sup>27</sup> Through Eisteddfods and the influence of progressive intellectuals, the cultural climate of Wales was significantly more amiable to the involvement of the working class in the appreciation of art. There was, however, above all, a strong sense of the need to bring forth home grown Welsh talent. Criticism was levelled at those who appeared to discriminate against the local artist.<sup>28</sup>

The creation of *Welsh Outlook* in 1914 was seminal in terms of defining Welsh identity through visual culture. Financed by the coal owner David Davies and edited by Thomas Jones, the monthly magazine was a platform in which to demonstrate the work of artists such as Evans as well as providing an opportunity to promote the suitability of industry as a subject matter.<sup>29</sup> In November 1914, *Outlook* described the study of painting and sculpture within Wales as being in a deplorably backward condition but also recognised the potential of artists such as Evans, Walters and Griffith, 'Shall we take advantage of the unexpected presence in our midst of this brilliant group? ...The opportunity is unique, but we may be too parochial to seize it.'<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Jones is an influential character in the development of working class art in the twentieth century. After leading the national campaign against TB, he then became secretary to the National Health Insurance Commission in Wales and later became secretary to the cabinet in Lloyd George's wartime government. Most interestingly on leaving this post he became secretary to the Pilgrim Trust who had financed the establishment of the Spennymoor Settlement. The Spennymoor Settlement papers reveal correspondence between the warden William Farrell and 'Tom' Jones. Jones's influence in promoting working class art is widely documented and it is suggested that Jones's wider contacts influenced and complemented Farrell's own Settlement ideals.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>30</sup> Extract from *Welsh Outlook* quoted in White, E. (1985) *The ladies of Gregynog*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p.18.

As well as the exposure that Evans, Walters and Griffiths received through *Welsh Outlook*, their work also gained stature from a series of exhibitions within Wales. Both Walters and Evans exhibited at the Glynn Vivian Gallery before going on to exhibit at National Eisteddfods.<sup>31</sup> In 1927, Evan Walters exhibited at the London gallery of Dorothy Warren. The show was a sell out and gave rise to Augustus John's claim that 'a new genius' had emerged.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 8  
Evan Walters  
*In the Pit*  
Oil on Canvas  
c.1911

Initially during the latter half of the 1920s, the response of London audiences to the emergence of Welsh mining scenes was wholly favourable. This response, was however, short lived and by the 1930s metropolitan interest in Welsh artists had waned. Peter Lord attributes Walters's short lived popularity to a number of factors,

...his subsequent failure to impress this London audience suggests that the success of the show was in large part a sympathetic gesture made in the aftermath of the general strike and the deepening depression. The pictures were timely without being threatening, enabling middle-of-the road patrons to express their social concern without venturing into radical politics.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Walters first showcased his mining scenes at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in 1920 and his work also featured in the National Eisteddfod of 1926 held in Swansea. Griffiths exhibited at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in 1928 whilst the work of Evans was shown at the National Eisteddfod of 1934 held in Neath.

<sup>32</sup> *Cambria Daily Leader*, 16 November, 1927, quoted in Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 188.

<sup>33</sup> Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, pp 188-189.

This point is interesting particularly as it reflects some of the motivation behind aspects of Cornish's wider appeal. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Cornish's art offered specific groups a particularly consoling image of mining life. It was conservative, apolitical and middle-of-the road like the images produced by Walters.

The ephemeral interest of the London art market was also a feature of George Bissell's artistic career. Bissill had worked as a miner in Nottingham before serving in the army during the First World War. Following the war he returned to the mines for a year before leaving on medical grounds to study at Nottingham School of Art.<sup>34</sup> Bissill's career was boosted by the support of the Arts League of Service, an organisation which aimed to increase the profile of little known artists. After moving to London in 1922, Bissill's underground scenes received favourable reviews in the press. However, by the 1930s his popularity had also declined. Townsend claims that by the time of Bissill's death in 1973 his contribution to the art world had been largely forgotten.<sup>35</sup>

Bissill's place in the history of 'mining art' was guaranteed by his inclusion in the 1983 *Coal: British Mining in Art* Exhibition. The NCB contributed three of the four works included in the exhibition from their private collection. The remaining work was loaned by the Victoria and Albert Museum suggesting that Bissill's contribution to mining art had not been completely overlooked by public collectors.<sup>36</sup> A retrospective exhibition of Bissill's work was held in Doncaster in 1979 with the *Southern Evening Echo* posing the question 'Is the miner artist coming back in fashion?'<sup>37</sup> For over forty years the work of Bissill had largely remained obscure to the artistic world. This resurgence is indicative of the varying levels of interest displayed in miner artists over the century.

For Walters the lack of follow-up to his success in London coincided with a change of attitude amongst Welsh intellectuals and the marginalisation

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<sup>34</sup> McManners and Wales, *Shafts of light*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Townsend, *Coal Faces, Mining Lives*, pp 62-63

<sup>36</sup> See exhibition catalogue for *Coal: British Mining in Art*, p. 87

<sup>37</sup> *Southern Evening Echo*, 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1979.

of Welsh industrial art. *The Contemporary Welsh Art Exhibition*, 1935, featured the work of Evan Walters but excluded Evans and Griffiths. The exhibition was characterised by an increasing discontent amongst intellectuals surrounding the accepted portrayal of Wales. Cyril Fox and Isaac Williams of the National Museum saw the point of the exhibition as elevating the minds of the people; celebration of the industrial image would not serve this purpose.<sup>38</sup> Despite the earlier praise levelled on Walters by Augustus John, the artist was later to dismiss his work claiming that he

wrote to Evan and advised him to go to paint in Provence and so develop a colour sense. He did not do so but always drifted back to S. Wales where colour is apparently taboo or non-existent. I don't think Evan Walters improved much in his short career...<sup>39</sup>

The careers of Evans, Walters and Griffiths were cut short as a result of their failure to gain the support of the London art market and more crucially they were unable to secure patronage within their own country of Wales. Without the backing of Welsh intellectuals, whose support appeared essential, their artistic careers floundered. The cessation of *Welsh Outlook* in 1933 marked the loss of a major voice championing 'mining art'. Lord makes a crucial point in this regard when he writes that just as Welsh industrial artists no longer found patronage, the Ashington Group were being hailed by English intellectuals.<sup>40</sup> It would appear that the focus of mining art shifted abruptly in the 1930s to the North East of England. Here the Ashington Group and the Spennymoor artists found a receptive audience and a niche in the regional and national market. Why did this shift occur and what factors ensured the unlimited critical and popular success of North East 'mining art' where its Welsh counterpart failed?

There are several reasons which could explain the favourable conditions which fostered mining art in Wales during the 1920s. As previously mentioned *Welsh Outlook* served as a cultural voice in Wales advocating the

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<sup>38</sup> Likewise in 1936, for similar reasons the National Museum rejected the opportunity to purchase two pieces of work by Vincent Evans, both of which had been shown at the Royal Academy. Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup> Augustus John quoted in Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 212.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 213

need for home grown artists working on a suitably Welsh theme. In comparison, once the Ashington Group and the Spennymoor Settlement were established, the local press and in particular *The Northern Echo* provided a huge amount of positive coverage. The local Welsh press emphasised the theme of the miner artist as early as 1916 when they referred to Evans as the 'young Ystalyfera collier artist.'<sup>41</sup> Yet it was the North East press who embraced the term 'pitmen painter' and in doing so brought a fresh interest in the work of miner artists. Following the cessation of *Outlook*, Welsh industrial artists no longer had a sympathetic public voice. In contrast the North East press ensured that regional artistic depictions remained very much in vogue and provided vocal support for miner artists such as Cornish and McGuinness.

What is perhaps harder to explain is why the national media and the London market displayed interest in North East mining art whilst abandoning similar work produced in Wales. The economic crisis provided the motive for establishing settlements in the North East but likewise similar influences were present in the Welsh coalfields where educational work was also being undertaken. In the North East, two distinct art groups emerged, whilst in Wales no comparison can be found which mirrors the Ashington Group or the Spennymoor Settlement. Harvey's analysis of Welsh mining history does highlight Glamorgan as boasting a large number of miner artists but as they worked in isolation, analogies cannot be drawn with events in the North East.<sup>42</sup> The arrival of Josef Herman in the Welsh town of Ystradgynlais in 1944 is proffered by Harvey as encouraging home grown miner art. Certainly Herman attracted the attention of Welsh born miner artists such as Cyril Ifold who made pilgrimages to Herman's Studio.<sup>43</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement and the Ashington Group, however, remain unique in terms of their early development and lasting artistic contribution.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 174

<sup>42</sup> Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p. 16

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 16



Evans, Walters and Griffiths may have stemmed from industrial backgrounds but they received academic training early on in their careers unlike their North East counterparts. They also left Wales in the early stages of their careers. In contrast the miner artists of the North East were static. They remained rooted in the region and more importantly to the colliery communities in which they lived. Again this factor added to their supposed authenticity and legitimatised their right to paint the mining scene. It seems that although the Welsh art market displayed a greater degree of sophistication in recognising potential in young artists and ensuring appropriate education, artists were nevertheless reliant upon satisfying middle class tastes.

In Wales, support for working class art by progressive intellectuals was continually thwarted. The conception of the *Contemporary Welsh Art Exhibition* had been largely due to the work of the artist Cedric Morris. Morris's industrial experience of Swansea was tempered by his privileged upbringing. After travelling extensively in pursuit of his artistic career, Morris eventually returned to England in 1927. Over the next few years he would return to Wales frequently in order to paint life in the Welsh valleys. By the early 1930s Morris became increasingly conscious of the impact of the depression within the country. As well as his involvement in organising the Welsh exhibition, Morris had by this point decided to live in a mining community.

Am staying here in an out of work miners' cottage - all extremely uncomfortable and filthy food, but nice people and clean and it is the landscape I want - 30/- per week - I shall stay a week or so – have finished one picture and there are 3 or 4 more – I am getting on to something. I am edging towards Swansea and getting used to living with these people. It is really heartbreaking the way they have to live – I am not enjoying it...<sup>44</sup>

Morris's belief in the importance of art as a means of improving the situation of the working classes echoed the sentiments of educationalists across the country. In Wales, however, he was met with resistance. Art depicting the mining scene was not widely represented in the *Contemporary Welsh Art Exhibition* and whilst working class attendance was respectable, the

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<sup>44</sup> Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 206.

exhibition failed to stimulate the next generation of potential working class artists. The failure to support art depicting the mining scene was apparent; the exhibition was as Evan Walters complained, a display of art by contemporary Welsh painters and not of contemporary Welsh art, 'What we have in Aberystwyth is English art by Welsh artists. Welsh art would express the ideals and soul of Wales.'<sup>45</sup> The distinction made here by Walters is interesting; Welsh art or art produced by miners is considered to represent national identity. In England, art produced by miners is contextualised along class lines; it is a working class art as opposed to a national one.

From the 1930s onwards North East miner artists benefited from increased opportunities to exhibit their work as well as the growing importance of the region in terms of social reportage. It is clear that the cultural atmosphere which had fostered the early development of miner artists in Wales was no longer present in the 1930s. The success of the North East miners lay at a time when social journalism and documentary production reached a high point in British culture. The work of the Ashington and Spennymoor artists satisfied the increased demand for insight into conditions in the North East whilst also contributing to the perpetual interest surrounding mining life. Miner artists in the North East benefitted from the support of the local media as well as a local audience. Both of these crucial factors appeared to be absent from artistic developments in Wales.

The mining communities of the North East featured heavily in the journalistic social realism of the 1930s. As Deborah Frizzell writes,

Male writers, filmmakers and photographers travelled north to Britain's industrial regions during the 1930s, a cultural convergence that attested not only to the prominence of industrial Britain in literary and visual media, but also to documentary's growing influence.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *South Wales Evening Post*, 11th September, 1935, quoted in Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 214.

<sup>46</sup> Frizzell, D. (1997) *Humphrey Spender's Humanist Landscapes: photo documents 1932-1942*, London: Yale University Press, p. 15.

Priestley's *English Journey* has since been regarded as a 'prototype and handbook' for the '...leftist, upper middle-class members of the Auden generation...' <sup>47</sup> For privileged men such as Bill Brandt, Tom Harrison and Humphrey Jennings, the North of England allowed them to become explorers in their own country whilst enabling them to reflect upon the economic hardship felt by many.

The legacy of J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* has been immense. The photo journalist Bill Brandt was particularly influenced by Priestley's work and set about on his own journey to visually record many of the places visited by the writer. The photographs of the North East produced by Brandt reveal a stark, barren wasteland which is devoid of hope. Brandt's images of the North undoubtedly defined the 1930s in the British imagination. Photographs of Newcastle, Jarrow and Stepney were published in the *Listener* (1934) and *Left Review* (1936) but as Frizzell makes clear often the image was used out of context to the original aim of the photographer. Thus press manipulation of the image ensured the photographs accentuated the contemporary belief in a clear cut North-South divide and between wealth and poverty.<sup>48</sup> Bryant affirms that even if the images were not manipulated by the press, the representations of the North 'were shaped as much by the growing repertoire of public images as by actual encounters with industrial north.'<sup>49</sup>

Mass Observation, established in 1937, reflected another facet of the burgeoning interest in working class life. This investigation focused on the inhabitants of Bolton or 'Worktown' as it was named by the observers. Humphrey Spender's extensive documentary photographs of Worktown reveal key aspects of working class life. Unlike Brandt's desolate landscapes, 'Worktown' is portrayed as a lively and vibrant community. Photographs of the unemployed remind audiences of the prevailing economic conditions. However, they are balanced with a sense of community and support as

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>49</sup> Bryant, 'W.H. Auden and the Homoerotics of the 1930s Documentary' p.106.

demonstrated in the various street scenes. In many respects Spender's 'Worktown' is portrayed in a similar sense to Cornish's Spennymoor.



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 9 Humphrey Spender *Queen's Park*, photograph.  
Figure 10 Norman Cornish *Man on a bench Reading*, pen chalk on paper.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Figure 11 Humphrey Spender, *Pub Interior*, photograph.  
Figure 12 Norman Cornish, *Domino Game*, pen on paper.

The people in both Spender's photographs and Cornish's images appear unaware that they are the subject of the artist's interest. Spender used an unobtrusive 35 mm Leica camera which enabled him to work unnoticed. Likewise, Cornish has emphasised the importance of being invisible to his subjects in order to capture the naturalism of the scene. In these images, Cornish is careful like Spender, to conceal his presence. This of course was more difficult for Cornish who was a local figure and known from an early stage as an artist. Likewise for Cornish a sketch book was obviously not as easy to conceal as a camera. Cornish is conscious not to depict the subject looking at the artist or the audience. By doing this he deliberately creates a sense of snap-shot photography in his work which makes it appear all the more realistic.

Both Cornish and Spender focus on similar aspects of community life (see figure 9 Humphrey Spender *Queen's Park* and figure 10 Norman Cornish *Man on a bench Reading*. Figure 11 Humphrey Spender, *Pub Interior* and figure 12 Norman Cornish, *Domino Game*).

Clearly there are differences in the size and nature of industry in 'Worktown' which is largely factory based. However, the social aspects of life appear to be very similar to that of Spennymoor. Thus a large proportion of Spender's photography reflects pub scenes, domino games and men playing darts. As well as these activities, it is interesting to note how Spender and Cornish were both attracted to unique events which catch the individual in a spontaneous action. Cornish's *Man Reading Posters in Shop Window* (figure 14) presents the same scene as Spender's *Window Shopping* (figure 13). Here the subjects are attracted to something in a shop window, and as a result their interest causes them to bend down to take a closer look. It is a simple scene but one which captures a fleeting moment of spontaneity on behalf of the subject. Cornish describes his personal fascination with the image and in doing so he elaborates upon what he regards as the meaning and symbolism of the scene,

Suddenly, I notice a little old man. He is bent forward, looking into a shop which organises trips abroad. He seems a poor man. His nose is almost touching the window, whilst his own reflection stares back at him. His long tattered overcoat is reflected in the wet rectangular paving stones. In contrast to this, the posters in the window are of pictures of sun-drenched countries.

The whole subject is full of interesting and powerful shapes and contrasts, with this little bit of humanity in the middle of it all. I have found a bit of my own personal world.<sup>50</sup>

Many of the 'observers' employed by the group hailed from a middle class background. It is interesting to note then, that despite coming from different backgrounds Spender and Cornish shared a common approach towards the depiction of the working class. Like Brandt, Spender's photographs were widely utilised by the media in newspapers as well as magazines such as *Picture Post* to illustrate the condition of Britain.

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<sup>50</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 79-80.



Figure 13

Figure 13 Humphrey Spender, *Window Shopping- Coffee Shop*, photograph.



Figure 14

Figure 14 Norman Cornish, *Man reading posters in shop window*, oil on board.

In 1937, the Ashington Group received a visit from Mass Observation. William Feaver discusses the significance of this event in his book *The Pitman Painters*. He discusses how Julian Trevelyan and Tom Harrison visited Ashington but found their 'cosy informality' lacked the authenticity which the observers had anticipated.<sup>51</sup> Their misconceptions were highlighted further by the gift of beer they had brought, especially when it emerged that half of the group did not drink alcohol.

In 1938 Mass Observation organised the debate 'Anyone Can Paint.' Held at the Bensham Grove Settlement in Gateshead, the Ashington Group attended along with a range of 'intellengtsiacs' from London. Farrell and Cornish also attended.<sup>52</sup> Following on from this a national touring exhibition was held during 1938. The exhibition was called *Unprofessional Painting* and included the work of the Ashington Group along with artists such as Alfred Wallis, the Cornish fisherman and artist. As a result of this, Robert Lyon and

<sup>51</sup> Feaver, *The Pitman Painters*, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with the artist, Spennymoor, May 2006.

Harry Wilson, members of the Ashington Group, were invited to appear on the television programme *Picture Page*.<sup>53</sup>

The attention from Mass Observation along with that from artists, writers and intellectuals is indicative of the extensive national interest in the lives of the working class. The image of the worker in art was a reoccurring theme for exhibitions held by the Artists International Association.<sup>54</sup> The AIA, founded in 1933, aimed to 'link with others in every country in support of democracy, oppose fascism and war [and] work for socialism...'<sup>55</sup> Essentially the AIA was a 'Unity of Artists for Peace, Democracy and Cultural Development,' it was in principal a left of centre political organisation which aimed to embrace all styles of art both modernist and traditional.<sup>56</sup> The move towards realism by many AIA artists is discussed by Lynda Morris and Robert Radford. This general trend, they argue gained strength as a result of the social issues of the period. The AIA attracted numerous high profile 'progressive artists' whose anti-fascist stance was demonstrated through a series of exhibitions beginning in 1935 with *Artists Against Fascism and War* held in London.<sup>57</sup> Prominent figures in social documentary such as Julian Trevelyan, one of the founders of Mass Observation, also aligned themselves with the AIA.<sup>58</sup>

Art historian Jonathan Hyman argues that the AIA's original communist members established a link between the debates of the 1930s and the aspirations of the 1950s. This link is highlighted by the AIA's support of miner artists such as Cornish in the 1950s. During the 1950s Cornish exhibited in two exhibitions organised by the AIA. Before examining these exhibitions it is necessary to understand the artistic context from which they originated.

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<sup>53</sup> As chapter four discusses, in 1947 Cornish appeared on the programme in connection with the NCB's *Art by the Miner* exhibition.

<sup>54</sup> Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p.2.

<sup>55</sup> Egbert, D.D, (1970) *Social Radicalism and the Arts, Western Europe, A Cultural History from the French Revolution to 1968*, London: G. Duckworth & Co, p. 498.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/>

<sup>57</sup> [www.artnet.com/library](http://www.artnet.com/library)

<sup>58</sup> Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 2.

The attempts made by artists and critics to establish a distinctively 'British road to social realism' are discussed by Hyman in his book *The battle for realism*.<sup>59</sup> Artist and critic John Berger has been identified as central to this process. Hyman argues that Berger's response to post-war reconstruction was summarised in his essay 'Re-establishing the Tradition' written by the critic in 1952. Here Berger argued for the development of a 'teachable tradition, a confident society and a broad cultural public' and as part of this process, there was a complete re-evaluation of the work produced by William Hogarth.<sup>60</sup> The AIA exhibition *Hogarth and English Caricature* held in 1943 was an important part of this development.<sup>61</sup> Hogarth's earlier form of English realism enabled critics to outline a national tradition which could be identified in the work of Hogarth and later through Victorian engravings, then the Camden Town Group and finally to the Euston Road School.<sup>62</sup>

Importantly within this tradition were continuing links between nineteenth century social realism which placed particular emphasis on the work of Courbet.<sup>63</sup> Berger was particularly praiseworthy of artists such as Josef Herman whose oil on canvas *The Road Gang*, 1953, echoed Courbet's *Stonebreakers*, 1849. Through the encouragement of this tradition, the work of certain artists, perceived to be working in the style of social realism, were highlighted by Berger. Whilst Berger admired Sheila Fell's depiction of the Cumbrian landscape, Hyman argues that his main interest lay in the depiction of the town and in Lowry's Salford or the depiction of Sheffield by Derrick Greaves. Cornish's career benefitted immensely from current artistic thought and his work was subsequently included in a range of national exhibitions. The first of these was *The Coalminers: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Coalminers and Professional Artists*. Organised by the AIA, this exhibition was held in 1950 with the objective being to demonstrate how the 'national activities of a community are a source of inspiration to artists...'<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 15, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, p.41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>64</sup> Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p. 83.



exhibition included works by artists such as Henry Moore, Josef Herman and Paul Hogarth as well as Cyril Ifford and George Bissell.

The following year in 1951, Cornish was invited to exhibit at an exhibition organised by the National Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This exhibition titled *Realism in Contemporary Art: Paintings on the Life and Struggles of the Working Class Produced by Northern Artists*, was held in Carlisle and featured the work of Pasmore and Lowry.<sup>65</sup> Like *The Coalminers*, this exhibition encouraged the combination of both professional and amateur artists whilst also reinforcing the accessibility of, as well as an interest in, the subject matter of everyday life.

The AIA's 1952 exhibition *The Mirror and the Square, An Exhibition ranging from Realism to Abstraction* represented the ongoing debate surrounding the nature and development of British art. The breadth of this exhibition was encapsulated by its title. The catalogue introduction argued that between the two poles of the mirror and the square 'lies the labyrinth of contemporary styles in painting and sculpture through which the enquiring spectator must find his way.'<sup>66</sup> Morris and Radford note that industrial Britain was represented in the works of Cornish, Herman and Chittock.<sup>67</sup> *The Mirror and Square* exhibition marked the transition of the AIA into an apolitical association. The AIA's increasing plurality towards artistic style alienated and frustrated Berger. Its eclecticism and shifting political stance ultimately pushed the critic further towards the Left. Berger's response was to organise his own exhibition, *Looking Forward*.

In the text that accompanied *Looking Forward*, Berger coined the phrase 'Constructive Realism.' This encapsulated his wide definition of social realism which included 'social realism or socialist realism' but also aimed 'to

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<sup>65</sup> Egbert, *Social Radicalism*, p. 535.

<sup>66</sup> Morris and Radford, *AIA*, p.88.

<sup>67</sup> Reviewers claimed that these industrial depictions were in turn overwhelmed by 'Mediterranean compositions'. In the AIA's Summer exhibition of 1950, the presence of scenes depicting life in Mediterranean countries had been noted. John Berger's own contribution to this exhibition depicted drunken sailors and acrobats. *Ibid.*, p.83.

include the work of painters who are less specifically political'.<sup>68</sup> Hyman argues that the artists included in this exhibition nevertheless remained social as opposed to socialist in outlook and that the inclusion of Lowry's anachronistic industrial landscapes demonstrated that little had changed since before the war.<sup>69</sup>

Berger's attempt to develop a distinctively British version of social realism was matched in the 1950s by his desire to define social realism and impress its qualities upon a younger generation of realists. The most high profile of these were the 'Kitchen sink' painters; John Bratby, Jack Smith, Derrick Greaves and Edward Middleditch. Their art was highlighted in 1954 by another leading art critic of time David Sylvester, who saw them depicting commonplace activities, capturing every aspect of the scene including the 'kitchen sink'.<sup>70</sup> The debate surrounding the direction and future of British art was ultimately resolved in favour of the success of American Abstract Expressionism. It was, however, the attempt to 're-establish a tradition' which provided Cornish with the opportunity to contribute to the development of realism in British art during the 1950s.

### **Cornish: subject matter, style and artistic influences.**

In his biography, *A Slice of Life*, Cornish reveals the artistic influences on his career,

I believe that in some way I have been influenced by almost every picture that I have ever looked at. I have been much influenced by the work of the important masters: Rembrandt's drawings; early Van Gogh; Bruegel; Degas; Toulouse-Lautrec; Cézanne; and maybe Lowry to name but a few. However, I have resisted being swamped by their influences, utilising their influences instead as an education in mental and visual awareness.<sup>71</sup>

Cornish's ability to include these influences within his art was noted by critics who attended his first Stone Gallery exhibition in 1959. *The Evening Chronicle*

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<sup>68</sup> Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>70</sup> See exhibition catalogue The Mayor Gallery in association with Julian Hartnoll, (1991) *The Kitchen Sink painters*, England: EGA p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Cornish, N. (2005) *A Slice of Life*, Newcastle: University Gallery Publications, p.83.

reviewer detected 'aspects of Rembrandt, Daumier, Degas, and Van Gogh, but all filtered through the sensibility of Cornish.' The critic described how the 'Durham man' 'has quite deliberately restricted his influences to those whose work approximates to his own conception of an artist's job and place in society.'<sup>72</sup> The following section will consider the work of Cornish in more detail. Through a discussion of subject matter and style, it will be possible to establish an understanding of why Cornish's art has influenced many aspects of regional identity.

As an artist, Cornish is perhaps best recognised for his bar room scenes, street landscapes and individual studies which have been described as 'sensitive and poignant'.<sup>73</sup> Cornish works in a variety of mediums including oils, watercolour, pastel and charcoal, whilst for his quicker sketches, Cornish prefers to use flowmaster pen. This section will consider Cornish's approach to his subject matter whilst also considering how Cornish has 'filtered' wider artistic influences in order to produce his own distinctive portrayal of mining life in Spennymoor.

From an early point in Cornish's career critics have focused upon his success in capturing 'the personality and landscape of the coal field'.<sup>74</sup> The subject matter of Cornish's work deals mainly with the social and working life of the mining town of Spennymoor. Cornish's art can be broadly grouped into four main themes. The environment in which Cornish lived and worked clearly had a profound impact upon the depiction of his subject matter. Working as a miner, the pit both above and below ground is a natural focus for his work. Secondly, the surrounding streets which acted as the hub of community life were also a hive of activity in which Cornish found ample subject matter.

Thirdly, a large body of Cornish's art relates to the pub environment. Here Cornish worked as a casual observer sometimes noting the posture and stance of men at the bar, at other times focussing on capturing the character

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<sup>72</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1959.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>74</sup> *Northern Despatch*, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1949.

and detail of the faces absorbed in a game of dominoes. Finally, Cornish's work provides an intimate portrayal of his family life through a series of portraits which capture his wife and children engaged in domestic tasks and school study. The themes incorporated within Cornish's work also reflect the core features of mining communities as identified by academic studies. As chapter two reveals, the pit, the pub and even the sociability of street life were perceived as playing a considerable role in fostering a sense of community and most importantly reinforcing a collective culture.

The novelist Sid Chaplin, described his friend Norman Cornish as inhabiting a 'Narrow World.' Cornish's art, however, reflects the scope and subject matter traditionally associated with genre painters. In Cornish's 'narrow world', Chaplin identifies two extremes,

His narrow world has two poles, two extremes. On the daylight side are pigeon crees and allotments, pit rows and pubs, fish and chip vans and market stalls, men carrying banners he himself designed... The other world starts at the tunnel under the railway at the top of the street in which he lives. This is the way to work, past the slag heap and the clay pits, and on to the back road to Dean and Chapter Colliery.<sup>75</sup>

Certainly, Cornish notes the influence of the Renaissance artist Pieter Brueghel (1525-1569) whose genre scenes depicted the feasts, rituals and activities of sixteenth century peasant life. The similarities between Brueghel's *Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap* (figure 15) and Cornish's *Kids in Snow* (figure 16) are striking. Both artists show groups of people enjoying the wintry conditions under a grey sky with the village landscape as the backdrop.

The anonymity of the characters depicted here is an important feature which distinguishes genre painting from history painting. The identities of the subjects in these works and in many of Cornish's scenes are unknown, they remain indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd (see figure 17 *Blue Day*). Likewise, in Lowry's street scenes the crowd is an unidentifiable mass whose indistinctiveness makes them appear 'simultaneously civic and deprived.'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Chaplin, 'Narrow World' printed in the Guardian, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

<sup>76</sup> Berger, J. (2001) *Selected Essays*, London: Bloomsby, p.140.



Figure 15  
Pieter Brueghel.  
*Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap*  
Oil  
1565



Figure 16  
Norman Cornish.  
*Kids in Snow*  
*Upper Church Street.*  
Oil.

In Cornish's work a series of figures emerge and these 'characters' are often repeated in various scenes. The robust flat capped miner seen standing

at the bar is replicated in depictions of the pit road. It is hard to estimate the miner's age and the uniformity of his clothing enables him to blend in with any of the other miners found in a Cornish scene. Similarly, the miner's wife is shown dressed in a long coat and headscarf. Likewise her identity is merged with the rest of the women in the town who all dress and look the same (figure 17 *Blue Day*). In this sense Cornish uses the uniformity of clothing to suggest a large degree of social assimilation in much the same way as Lowry (figure 18 *Group of People*).



Figure 17  
Norman Cornish  
*Blue Day*  
Pastel



Figure 18  
L.S. Lowry  
*Group of People*  
1959  
Watercolour.



Cornish's choice of subject matter occurred as a result of his upbringing but also because of the pivotal advice he received from William Farrell. His early upbringing was typical of a boy born into a large family, living in a mining community during the first half of the twentieth century. His father was a miner and when aged 14, Cornish's compulsory education concluded. It was naturally expected that he would follow his father down the pit. This he did and in 1933 was apprenticed at the Dean and Chapter Colliery, working five days a week for just over 10 shillings. Cornish was to continue working as a miner for a further 33 years until he made the decision to retire in 1966.

Cornish had from a young age demonstrated his interest and natural talent for drawing. The year after his apprenticeship at the Dean and Chapter Colliery, Cornish joined the sketching club of the Spennymoor Settlement which had been established to alleviate the chronic unemployment and hardship of the interwar years. It was at the Settlement that Cornish first demonstrated his capabilities as an artist. It was as part of this group that the artistic suitability of the mining community was confirmed for Cornish by William Farrell. The influence of Farrell, alongside Cornish's own experience of mining life, was to prove instrumental to his artistic career. By taking Farrell's advice and painting 'what he knew best' critics have regarded Cornish's work as a social documentation of Spennymoor's twentieth century history.

Quoting from Chaplin once more, the author writes of Spennymoor,

In this narrow world are one town, one pit and many people; all in a strip of land roughly a mile wide and three miles long, a land with a dark as well as a light side. The world is narrow; what matters is that one man by means of an art which is also an obsession has enlarged and endowed it with such meaning that strangers can share in it.<sup>77</sup>

At first it may appear that Chaplin is perhaps a little over generous in his assessment of the value and universal appeal of Cornish's Spennymoor scenes. However, his point remains interesting. John Berger makes a more

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<sup>77</sup> Chaplin, 'Narrow World' printed in the Guardian, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

cautious assessment of the social and historical meaning of L.S. Lowry's art. Claiming not to 'exaggerate the meaning of Lowry's work or give it a historical load which is too heavy for it' Berger nevertheless maintains that 'everything in his work is informed by the character of a specific place and period.'<sup>78</sup>

Philip Dodd, in discussing the work of Lowry, reveals how places can often be mediated to us by visual as well as verbal representations. He regards a place with a specific history and an agreed iconography as a 'Lowryscape.'<sup>79</sup> Whilst Dodd acknowledges the complexity in representing a sense of place, he highlights two examples of how Lowry's work has been utilised to do just that. The first is Granada television's attempt to promote itself as a cultural force by 'naturally' utilising Lowry as a suitable focus for programmes. Here he is referring to the screening of the ballet *A Simple Man* which depicted the painter's life. Secondly, Dodd refers to the use of Lowry's *The Doctor's Surgery*, 1936, as the cover image for Richard Hoggart's autobiography, *A Local Habitation*.

Cornish's depiction of Spennymoor has been taken and embraced as a wider regional portrayal by various groups and in particular the local media. Most recently, a Cornish image was used to illustrate the front cover of Dave Russell's *Looking North*, 2004. The flat capped miners and the whippet are used to suggest a sense of 'Northernness.' Tyne Tees Television has also utilised the inherent 'Northernness' of a Cornish image to assert their cultural presence within the region. From 1959 onwards, Cornish's work and career formed the subject of numerous programmes and documentaries produced by the network. Likewise, programme directors and presenters at the company were also buyers and collectors of Cornish works. Cornish's visual depiction

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<sup>78</sup> Berger, J. (2001) p. 139, 143.

<sup>79</sup> Dodd, P. (1990), Lowryscapes: 'recent writings about 'the North' in *Critical Quarterly*, 32 (2) p.17. Newton's study of the artist's colony at Cullercoats during the period c. 1870-1914 has also considered amongst many other issues, the influence of regionalism on the Naturalist imagery found in the work of colony artists. Looking beyond the North, it is clear that regionalism is at the core of many art history studies. Any work dealing with St Ives must concern itself with the influence of environment and geography. Here was a school of artists and sculptors whose combined work has contributed to a distinctive tradition in the history of British art. Laura Newton, *The Cullercoats artists' colony c1870-1914*, p.3. The Tate Gallery (1985). *St Ives, 1939-1964 Twenty five years of painting, sculpture and pottery*, London : The Tate Gallery.



has also been used to highlight Chaplin's literary portrayal of life in the region. Like Lowry, Cornish's art has increasingly become linked to a specific place as well as to a sense of 'Northernness'.<sup>80</sup> Their depiction of the industrial scene was a source of commonality.

Throughout his career Cornish has received praise for his subject matter and loyalty to the Northern scene. In the opinion of *The Evening Chronicle* writer Cornish receives recognition for his 'sound' 'Northern Judgement'.<sup>81</sup> Comparisons of Cornish and Lowry stem from their commitment to portraying the industrial life of a particular area. Interestingly Peter Brock in writing for the *Daily Express* describes Lowry as 'uncompromisingly Northern.'<sup>82</sup> Brock argues that there is an element of Northernness present within the work of both Cornish and Lowry. He even considers Cornish's face and indeed those of the miners he paints, and concludes that they have 'hardness' but also 'bare pathos.' In Brock's view they represent something which is typically 'Northern'.

Cornish's understanding of Spennymoor life contributes hugely to what the artist perceives and depicts. Scott Dobson poses the question 'Take him [Cornish] from that community and what would he be?'<sup>83</sup> The answer to the question comes from an interesting exchange recalled by Sid Chaplin,

I remember showing him Byker Bridge. He made a drawing, then shook his head: "It's all Lowry." The drawing was sterile not because it was Lowry's subject but because it straddled another world and to re-create the bridge he must know the people who use it or live around it.<sup>84</sup>

On the same occasion Cornish dismissed his ability to draw a ship because he had no idea of the thickness of the steel plate. Looking at the Tyne,

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<sup>80</sup> Whilst Lowry's regional scenes eventually acquired him a national reputation, Cornish on the other hand is an artist whose career and work retains a stronger regional appeal. The two artists were brought together in the 1960s by their shared association with Newcastle's Stone Gallery, which forms the subject of chapter six. They also exhibited at various national exhibitions during this period which served to showcase the work of artists working in the style of social realism.

<sup>81</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1960.

<sup>82</sup> *Daily Express*, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1964.

<sup>83</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1960.

<sup>84</sup> Chaplin, 'Narrow World' printed in *the Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

Cornish states 'I know plenty of painters who could do that better than me. But I can do Spennymoor.'<sup>85</sup>

For Cornish's 1968 exhibition at the Stone Gallery, he included scenes depicting areas other than Spennymoor. One painting was of Newcastle's Eldon Square. This work received particular attention, as a 'crowded colourful slice of Newcastle upon Tyne in reds and greens, reminiscent of Lowry with its living background of people and pigeons.'<sup>86</sup> It is interesting that Cornish's move away from his local Spennymoor has been interpreted by the critic as achieving a result comparable to Lowry.

Berger argued that Lowry worked without fixed aims, so that any resulting wider significance of the work was purely coincidence. This is a major difference to Cornish whose intentions are often to capture the emotion of the scene and provide the audience with a sense of its importance and meaning. He appears consciously aware of the meaning which his pictures acquire. On describing an image of his grandmother Cornish emphasises the context and the ensuing meaning of the scene.

The painter must be closely identified with his subject. For example when I paint my Granny knitting pit socks, I note the strong hands and the wedding ring deeply embedded into her finger. I see her as a symbol of every working class mother.<sup>87</sup>

The symbolism of his subject matter has always been an element of Cornish's work. Cornish often compares telegraph poles to crucifixes or the pit gantry to a spider's web. Meaning and symbolism are an important part of his attraction and motivation in depicting a scene.

Interestingly, some critics view his work as being 'over-romanticised' whilst others acknowledge that a scene must have 'an emotional value' for it to be of interest to Cornish.<sup>88</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* also commented

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<sup>85</sup> Chaplin, 'Narrow World' printed in the *Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

<sup>86</sup> *Morning Star*, 1960. Taken from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>87</sup> Untitled newspaper clipping dated 1950. Taken from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>88</sup> *The Journal*, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1966.

upon the emotional relationship between Cornish and his subject, 'The subtle colour of *An Old Lady* and the *Mother and Child* drawn with compassion and love, are comparable achievements with the best of Degas.'<sup>89</sup> *The Times* noted in 1968, how in recent years the artist has been 'shedding a tendency to social romanticism in his work with great gain to the latter in objectivity and universality.' The critic argues that 'In fact Mr. Cornish's enclosed industrial community is to some extent life in microcosm...'<sup>90</sup>

Cornish regards Degas as a significant influence on his work and critics have also noted this. In terms of subject matter Cornish's family scenes which include bathing the children or drying and combing their hair are also themes which appealed to Degas. *The Northern Echo* correspondent describes his visit to Cornish's 1959 exhibition,

Strange as it now seems, I had half forgotten when I first entered the gallery, that Cornish was in fact taking part. Coming suddenly upon his collected work I wondered for one delirious moment, who had the good fortune to discover so many previously uncatalogued masterpieces by Degas.

He also commented upon Cornish's use of pastel in which he handles the 'Degas medium' with 'all the assurance of a master himself.'<sup>91</sup>

Art critic William Varley, has followed the career of Cornish since the 1960s when he reviewed Cornish's exhibitions for the *Guardian* newspaper. More recently he has contributed the foreword to the exhibition catalogue accompanying Cornish's 2005 exhibition. In describing Cornish's use of space, the critic noted how he often evokes a cut off view like that of snap shot photography. Varley claims that Cornish's 'use of the close up' is reminiscent of Degas and his drawings of figures lounging at the bar. Varley's recent praise for Cornish is interesting. In the 1960s, Varley was distinguished by his criticism of the artist. This response is considered in more detail in chapter six. The critic, when discussing Cornish's use of composition in 1966,

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<sup>89</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>90</sup> *The Times*, 1968. Taken from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>91</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1959.

appeared unimpressed by his 'over-reliance' upon the device of cutting off objects at the picture's lower edge as a way of establishing space and depth.

Cornish's understanding of composition appears to have occurred naturally. In an interview in 1999, he was asked about his use of composition and how he acquired this skill. Cornish responded uncertainly saying he 'must' have been taught composition at some point but added that as an artist he believed he had an 'involved sense' of composition.<sup>92</sup> This sense of inbuilt composition manifests itself frequently within his work. Writing about the picture, *Bathtime Oils* (figure 63), Cornish explained,

I also painted Sarah whilst she was drying our small son in front of the fire after he had had his bath. I tried to depict young life growing out of the older life that gave birth to it. The composition was like a young healthy plant growing out of the nourishing soil.<sup>93</sup>



Figure 19  
Norman Cornish  
*Conversation Piece*  
Oil on pastel paper



Figure 20  
Norman Cornish  
*Pub Talk*  
Oil on pastel paper

Symmetry within a composition is equally important to Cornish as a method of conveying meaning as the above drawings demonstrate (figure 19 *Conversation Piece* and figure 20 *Pub Talk*). He writes, 'I see two men having a close conversation in a pub, their shape resembles a bridge, with their heads looking like keystones (symbolically their heads are together and conversation is a bridge between minds).' The subsequent pieces also

<sup>92</sup> Norman Cornish interviewed by Michael Chaplin, 17 October, 1999.

<sup>93</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p.44.

highlight the repetition of a similar scene that occurs so frequently with Cornish's work.



Figure 21  
Figure Norman Cornish  
*Three Wet Gossips*  
Oils



Figure 22  
Norman Cornish  
*Three Men in a Bar*  
Charcoal

Cornish often repeats the symmetry of a composition in different settings. *Three Wet Gossips* (figure 21) and *Three men in a Bar* (figure 22) demonstrate a similar composition of three figures in conversation, but reveal a distinct gender divide in social interaction. The masculinity of the pub environment can be contrasted with that of the street scene in which the women dominate. As mentioned earlier, the clothing of the figures in the separate scenes indicates a strong degree of social homogeneity from Spennymoor residents.

The process by which an image is produced is very much experiential. In sketches, Cornish would attempt to capture the posture of the subjects and composition of the scene, and would often use these rougher workings as the foundation for a larger work which he would complete in his studio at home. His sketch books formulate the basis of his ideas and demonstrate the range of source material he has collated from his surroundings. In his sketch book Cornish makes extensive notes with regard to the colour of the original scene in order for him to replicate the exact tonal qualities in his paintings (figure 23 Extracts from Cornish's sketch pad below). Varley considers Cornish's use of

Wed. Dec. 28th 1933  
 The sky is interestingly colored gray and blue.  
 The bottom slopes are darker but reflect blue sky lit.

B. 81

10. B. 81

Pink

Yr  
D. Gandy.

The St. Luke's in W. Ey. working drawings for painting. Cornish

G. Ballou shown.  
with picture for free

ST. LUKE'S  
CHURCH

67



Chaplin acutely observed that life in Spennymoor comprised of both a dark and a light side. Cornish uses colour in order to differentiate these two worlds and to demonstrate how community life above the pit is in stark contrast to the isolation of the underground miner. The effectiveness of colour is particularly noticeable in Cornish's larger oils. The warmth and tone of the orange and brown colour used in barroom scenes such as *Busy Bar* (figure 24) contrasts sharply with the greys and blues of the pit road. In *Pit Road with Telegraph Pole and Lights* (figure 25) the individual is very much a secondary consideration to the environment; a solitary stooped miner braves a cold morning on his way to work. The darkness of the background only contributes to a sense of foreboding and isolation of the lone figure. Comparing this to Cornish's group scenes there is little of the warmth and companionship of community which is found in abundance within the bar room scenes. Even the *Three Wet Gossips* (figure 21) are huddled together despite the downpour of rain and absorbed in their conversation. The contrast in colour and scene demonstrates most vividly what Chaplin describes as the extremes of mining life where the mutual support and sense of community are balanced by the dangers of work and the hardship of poverty.



Figure 24  
Norman Cornish  
*Busy Bar*

Oil on canvas



Figure 25  
*Pit Road with Telegraph Pole and Lights*  
Oil on canvas  
The Mallabar Request.

The bar room drawings which fill Cornish's sketch books are typical of the artist's interest in capturing the posture and shape of his subjects (figures 26 and 27 photographs of sketchbooks and material). Cornish describes his own fascination with this scene,

I made drawings of pub interiors in days past because I was fascinated by the men standing at the bar drinking and talking, or sitting playing dominoes. I was attracted by the wonderful shapes that they made in their various attitudes.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Cornish, *Slice of life*, p.79.





Figure 26



Figure 27

Cornish's studio contains volumes of sketchbooks and material.

Cornish's fascination with pub scenes has elicited comparisons with the bar scenes of Toulouse-Lautrec. Interestingly, in 1961 Tyne Tees Television compared the work of Cornish and Lautrec in the programme *Your Kind of Music* (figure 28 extract from *The Viewer*). The work of the two artists was accompanied by music from the Northern Symphony Orchestra. The local press emphasised the similarities by publishing the images shown below. Comparisons of the artists were a regular point of interest for the art critic W.E. Johnson who described the 'urgency' and 'fluidity' of Cornish's sketches as modern day equivalents to those produced by Lautrec.<sup>96</sup> Cornish's bar room scenes were of particular significance to the critic who saw 'in the smoke

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<sup>96</sup> *Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1964.

filled atmosphere of the snug' the 'twentieth century equivalent of Toulouse-Lautrec.'<sup>97</sup>

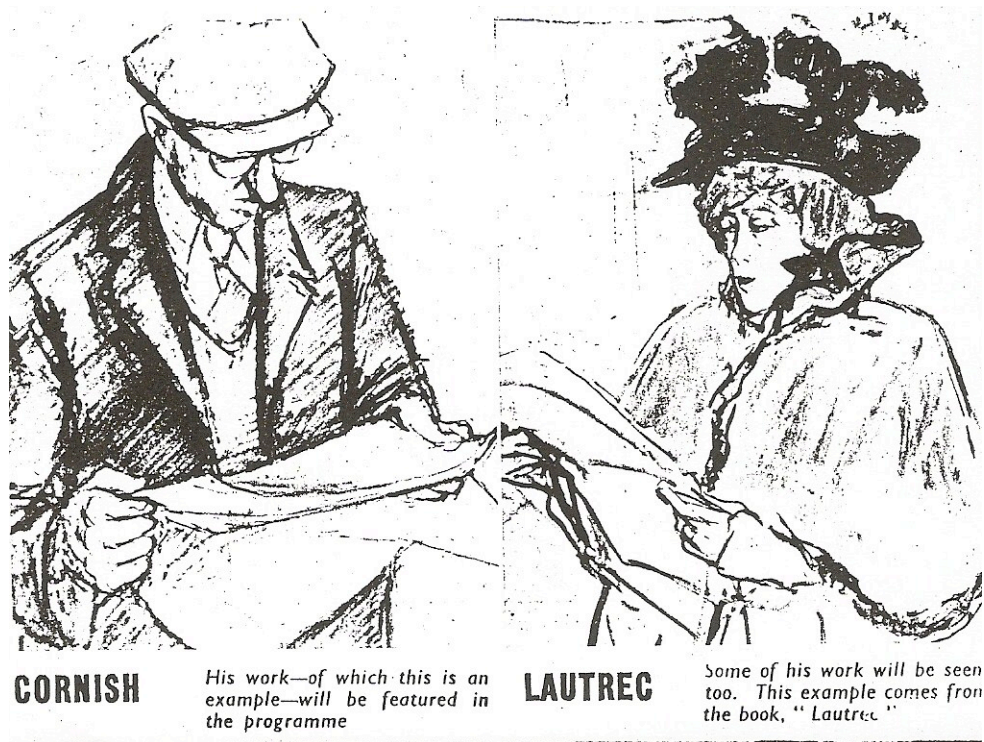


Figure 28  
*The Viewer*  
 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1961

In 1966, Tyne Tees Television paid for the artist to visit Paris. The trip was recorded as part of a programme called *Close up on Cornish in Paris*. The visit clearly had an impact upon Cornish and the nature of the work he subsequently produced. The sketch of the two women in *le Fandango "Rue Moliere"* (figure 29) lacks the roundness and shape of Cornish's normal female figures. In the style of Lautrec's Parisian drinkers, Cornish draws the facial features of the women as pointed and sharp. A detail from *Moulin de la Galette* (figure 30) shows how Cornish's change in style elicits comparison with Lautrec.

<sup>97</sup> *Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1961.



Figure 29  
Norman Cornish  
*le Fandango "Rue Moliere"*  
Flowmaster pen



Figure 30  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
Detail from *Moulin de la Galette*  
1889  
Oil Sketch

Another image inspired by the artist's trip to Paris depicts an elderly French woman in recognisable Cornish style. With her back to the audience, this well rounded figure is shown walking up a Montmartre street. This particular image reveals the influence of Vincent Van Gogh. A comparison of Cornish's *Elderly French Woman* (figure 31) and Van Gogh's sketches of peasant women such as *Peasant woman with Shawl over her Head* (figure



32) are striking. 'Vincent' as Cornish refers to him is, is an artist he finds particularly inspirational.<sup>98</sup> Other aspects of Cornish's work have been compared favourably with Van Gogh.<sup>99</sup>



Figure 31  
Norman Cornish  
*Elderly French Woman*  
Image from the Northern Echo.



Figure 32  
Vincent Van Gogh  
*Peasant woman with Shawl over her Head, Seen from the back,*  
Charcoal  
1885

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<sup>98</sup> *Time and Tide*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1963.

<sup>99</sup> For example, Cornish's *Starry Night* in which the artist 'likenes the lights of industry to stars at night' has been compared with Van Gogh's work of the same name by critic William Varley. Varley, 'Spennymoor to Palookaville,' p. 5.

Van Gogh's own influences are of particular relevance to the work produced by Cornish. In 1879, Van Gogh moved to the Borinage in southern Belgium in order to work as a minister's assistant. At the time, the area had been overrun by industry and its mineshafts were surrounded 'by poor miners' huts, a few dead trees black from smoke, thorn hedges, dunghills, ash dumps.'<sup>100</sup> During this period, the artist found the work of the genre painter Jean-Francois Millet particularly compelling and began to recreate many of his works. In 1880, Van Gogh revealed in a letter to his brother that he had already drawn Millet's *The Sower* five times. Judy Sund believes that Millet's depictions of peasants appealed to Van Gogh because of their Christian connotations.<sup>101</sup>

In the post-1848 revolutionary climate of France, Jean-Francois Millet and Gustave Courbet were two artists whose work challenged the existing orthodoxy by presenting genre themes in the manner traditionally reserved for history painting. Their individual depiction of rural peasant life was received in many different ways. Millet's peasants are romanticised as the artist 'imposes the sublime upon the ordinary.'<sup>102</sup> One contemporary critic wrote in response to seeing *The Gleaners* that the peasants depicted in it, 'are too conceited, they betray too clearly their claims to a pedigree from Michelangelo's Sibyls, and certainly they wear their rags more superbly than Poussin's reapers wear their draperies.'<sup>103</sup> Courbet's peasants in contrast are depicted by the artist as fat, naked and burdened by heavy toil. His depiction of rural life is less romanticised than Millet's and works such as *The Stone-breakers* were believed to have aroused the fear of town dwellers who felt threatened by the prospect of being overrun by the rural population.<sup>104</sup>

Clearly Van Gogh aligned his own depiction of the peasant with that of Millet, whose work he found inspirational. Cornish too can be seen in this sense as following a more romanticised depiction of working class life. As a

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<sup>100</sup> Sund, J. (2002) *Van Gogh*, London: Phaidon, p. 37

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>102</sup> Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeoisie*, p.73

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>104</sup> 'Gustave Courbet' *Grove Dictionary of Art*, p. 53

genre painter, Cornish deals with many aspects of everyday life. However, he does so in a way that reduces the tensions of hardship, toil and poverty in favour of warmer version of mining life. When critics responded negatively to Van Gogh's *The Potato-eaters*, 1885 the artist responded by referring to Zola's dictum that a work of art is a slice of nature, viewed through a temperament.<sup>105</sup>

There is an element of heroism in Cornish's miner, who like Millet's or Van Gogh's peasants appear to go about their day with passive acceptance of their circumstances. Writing on Millet, T.J. Clark argues that the artist had to convey in a single image the sense and nature of a task, its anonymity, whilst also suggesting that work was both tragic in the old sense of the word as well as being ordinary.<sup>106</sup> However, as Berger points out, Millet identified with his subjects: 'He chose to paint peasants because he was one.'<sup>107</sup> Cornish too possesses a deep sense of identification with his miners mainly because he was one. His miners, however, appear to respond to their environment in a more positive sense. Their stoicism enables them to share in the community spirit present within the pub and street scenes.

Repetition is a key aspect of Cornish's work, as Chaplin was quick to point out,

His subjects are the same today as yesterday, last year, and in his boyhood. He has been painting a long time, the same places, the same people over and over again, but with the difference that he has found so much more significant detail, so much more meaning, so much more to brood over.<sup>108</sup>

Not only does Cornish remain faithful to the same subject matter, he frequently depicts exactly the same scene with only the smallest variation. This noticeable feature of Cornish's work could be, as Chaplin argues due to Cornish's desire to improve on the scene and to add new detail. It could be more cynically related to the popularity and demand of these scenes just as much as it is to Cornish's own preference to paint a specific viewpoint.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>106</sup> Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois*, p. 73.

<sup>107</sup> Berger, J. (1960) *Permanent Red*, London: Butler and Tanner, p. 188-189.

<sup>108</sup> Chaplin, 'Narrow world' printed in the *Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

By choosing not to date his work and owing to the repetition of subject matter, the differentiation of Cornish's earlier work from those pieces produced more recently is often complicated. Without dates, Cornish's work acquires a sense of fluidity in terms of decade. Cornish's paintings create a sense of place and time without the need to be overtly specific about that place or time. The timeless mining community could belong to the 1930s yet it could quite as easily refer to the 1950s. Any sense of progress or change is subtle within his work, for example street scenes hint at modernity through the inclusion of a parked car in the street. What Cornish clearly achieves in his work is a sense and feeling of a 'traditional' mining community which existed in the popular imagination at various points between 1930 and 1970.

### **Conclusion.**

Norman Cornish has emerged as one of the most profitable, locally popular and successful miner artists. As the subsequent chapters will endeavour to explore, his depiction of the mining community of Spennymoor has broader implications in terms of the region's portrayal and self identity. This chapter, however, has demonstrated the need to re-evaluate the conditions which encouraged the emergence of miner artists during the twentieth century. It has also raised issues regarding the extent to which working class artists have been considered untouched by external influences. As *Evening Chronicle* art critic Scott Dobson recognised Norman Cornish is 'in the main, self-taught... He is not however, in the least primitive.'<sup>109</sup>

Cornish's work has undoubtedly been influenced by a variety of artistic, social and personal factors. Utilising the work of artists such as Van Gogh, Millet, Breughel and even Lowry, Cornish has depicted the mining scene in a manner which has been considered by some to be realistic. This perceived realism enabled Cornish to exhibit at national exhibitions whilst also contributing to a significant artistic debate of the post war years. His work has

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<sup>109</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 1964. Taken from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

also attracted praise for the 'paradoxical tenderness' with which he treats his subjects.<sup>110</sup> The result of which, is that his art presents a consoling and soothing depiction of working class community life. The following chapters will now consider Cornish's presentation of community in more detail before examining exactly how his depiction of Spennymoor has been utilised by organisations and groups for various purposes as well as considering how its 'Northernness' appeals to a particular local audience.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.,



# Chapter two

## The Mining Community.



## The Mining Community.

In 1949 the *Northern Despatch* referred to the 19<sup>th</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Festival as representing the 'The Miner's Life on Canvas' and Cornish received particular praise for providing a 'real impression of life in this district.'<sup>1</sup> Over the decades Cornish's art has been consistently seen by many as presenting a realistic and accurate depiction of mining life. Cornish's sense of community is influenced by collective cultural behaviour in which the uniqueness of pit work is central to fostering this distinct shared outlook. This chapter does not seek to prove or disprove the reality or even the existence of the traditional mining community. Instead, it examines the extent to which Cornish's work has contributed to a wider academic, journalistic and literary consensus in which the homogeneity of the mining community is celebrated as a distinct way of life.

Cornish's art will provide the framework for analysis but will be supported by the findings of broader mining studies which discuss the homogeneity and distinctiveness of mining life. In particular, William Farrell's lengthy stay in the town of Spennymoor as warden of the Spennymoor Settlement has generated a wealth of information relating to the social structure of this community and its cultural life.<sup>2</sup> This evidence will be utilised to address specific issues which relate to the understanding of mining communities: what were their fundamental features and why were they regarded as being so distinct?

### **Community, Culture and Northernness.**

Defining community is problematic not least because it is a heavily loaded word. This difficulty is compounded further by the fact that within modern social description, community is very much a word in vogue, 'terms like, community education, community action, community health, community development, community school...are all part of contemporary sociological, educational and

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<sup>1</sup> *Northern Despatch*, 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1949

<sup>2</sup> William Farrell arrived in Spennymoor in 1931.

political thought and experience'.<sup>3</sup> Bauman emphasises the emotive value associated with the word 'community', 'Words have meanings: some words also have a 'feel'. The word 'community' is one of them. It feels good...community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place'.<sup>4</sup>

Within academic accounts, the definition of community often rests upon a level of unity. As Paul Knox and Steven Pinch write, 'Communities exist where a degree of social coherence develops on the basis of interdependence which in turn produces a uniformity of custom, taste and modes of thought and speech'.<sup>5</sup> Unity was also prominent in D.C Thorn's definition, which suggests that community is a 'cohesive group of people, held together by different things which they share, for example, territory, ideas, work, skills'.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that Thorn's definition which dates from 1976 resonates with many of the sentiments expressed by Knox and Pinch in the most recent edition of their work *Urban Social Geography*, 2006.

Many of these accounts regard the tangible experiences of environment, geography and employment as defining features of the socially cohesive community. It could be argued that some of these factors were more influential within past communities, especially in the case of shared employment where one industry could dominate the local economy. However, what remains significant is the emotional expression of community which is naturally more tentative and involves an appreciation of the meanings imposed upon community and the cultural and traditional practices exhibited by its inhabitants.

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<sup>3</sup> Saint Lamont, S. (2000) "*We're the last in everything*" *Participation in Two Community Health Projects in the North East of England*, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, Unpublished PhD Thesis, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Bauman, Z. (2001) *Community seeking safety in an Insecure World*, United Kingdom: Polity Press, p. 1. As early as 1950, Hillary documented as many as 96 definitions of community from research up to that date. Hillary, G. (1955) 'Definitions of Community: some areas of agreement' in *Rural Sociology*, 20, pp 111-123.

<sup>5</sup> Knox, P. and Finch, S. (2000) *Urban Social Geography An Introduction*, England: Pearson Education Limited, p.257.

<sup>6</sup> Thorns, D.C (1976) *The Quest for Community: Social Aspects of Residential Growth*, London: Halstead, p.15.



Figure 33  
Norman Cornish  
*Edward Street*  
Oil on board



Figure 34  
Edward Street, Spennymoor.  
Photograph.

The above photograph (figure 34 Edward Street, Spennymoor) was used in the first edition of Cornish's autobiography *A Slice of Life* (1989). The image was used to emphasise the reality of Edward Street with Cornish's depiction of it (figure 33 Edward Street). Taken from roughly the same place and angle, the similarities with the painting, demonstrate why critics see the artist as providing a 'real' and authentic depiction of community life in Spennymoor.

During the twentieth century, community became a central feature of sociological analysis. The North of England was geographically ideal for researchers whose aim was to understand the socio-economic development of the 'traditional' working class community. In many of these studies, the authors were able to present a culturally cohesive working class community-one which was essentially 'Northern.' During the interwar years, accounts increasingly focussed upon the debilitating impact of economic decline within the North East. The working class community was presented as culturally poor and the cohesiveness displayed was often regarded negatively as insular, limiting and alien to outsiders.

The predominantly negative external interest in the region was briefly reversed from about 1957 to the mid 1960s. It was at this point when northern film, literature, television and popular music found a prominent position within national culture. According to Dave Russell the publication of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957 along with John Braine's *Room at the Top* were key events within this process which Russell terms the 'northernisation' of national culture.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, this interest in the North coincided with a wider consideration of culture, community and working class life. The publication of *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams in 1958, argued that 'culture' represented a 'whole way of life'.<sup>8</sup> In 'Culture is Ordinary' also published in 1958, Williams expressed the importance of 'everydayness' within culture.<sup>9</sup> In doing so he challenged the established views of literary critics of the 1930s such as F.R Leavis whose pamphlet *Mass Civilianisation and Minority Culture* outlined many of his views on culture. For Leavis, culture marked the highpoint of civilisation and the concern of the educated elite.<sup>10</sup>

Slightly outside the parameters set by Russell, comes the television success of *Close the Coalhouse Door*, an event which its scriptwriter Alan Plater regards as a decisive point for the North East. Televised by the BBC in 1969, *Close the Coalhouse Door* was the first networked play to be written and played in a North

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<sup>7</sup> Russell, *Looking North*, p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Culture and society*, p.18.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, R. (1958) 'Culture is Ordinary' in McKenzie, Norman. ed *Conviction* London: MacGibbon and Kee. Gray. A and McGuigan. J. ed. (1983) *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, pp 5-14.

<sup>10</sup> Barker, C. (2008) *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*, London: Sage, p. 41.

East accent.<sup>11</sup> This followed on from earlier successes such as the soap opera *Coronation Street* launched in 1960 which placed emphasis on the 'everydayness' of storylines and whose characters spoke in Northern accents and used dialect. In March 1961, the programme reached number one in the television ratings. At the same time the Television Audience Measurement reported that 75% of available viewers tuned into *Coronation Street*. This equated to an audience of 15 million people.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of the wider interest in working class life, the mining community became the focus of many studies. One of the most frequently cited coalfield surveys by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter was published in 1956. This thematic sociological study of a Yorkshire coal mining community was based upon the pseudonymised town of Ashton. Work, leisure and family were the central topics of analysis. The overarching implication of the research was suggested by its title, *Coal is Our Life*. In using this title, the authors summarised what was understood to be the intrinsic and often complex relationship between mining communities and the industry which sustained them. Barry Supple describes the extremity of life within mining towns and villages, 'For all their inhabitants, life as well as work meant coal.'<sup>13</sup> The close connection between industry and society ensured that an apparent cultural cohesiveness emerged firmly rooted around the notion of community. Critiques of the mining community such as Supple, Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter tend to stress the generalisations within cultural patterns as a means of demonstrating cultural cohesiveness.

The difference between distinctiveness and generalisation is a key difficulty in presenting an accurate representation of mining communities. Supple's volume in *The History Of the British Coalmining Industry* acknowledges the difficulties surrounding this, arguing that 'contemporaries and historians have tended to rely on evidence which obscures the subtleties and regional variety of everyday life, social patterns, and attitudes in mining communities.'<sup>14</sup> The temptation to over emphasise the general aspects of mining community life has often been acknowledged by

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<sup>11</sup> Plater, A. 'The Drama of the North East' in *Geordies*, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Little, D. (1995). *The Coronation Street Story*. London: Boxtree, p.35.

<sup>13</sup> Supple, *History of British Coal Industry*, p. 480.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

writers. In Mark Benney's *Charity Main: A coalfield chronicle* published in 1946 the narrator Johnson describes the Northern coalfield whilst trying not to invent anything that is not typical, and would leave 'even the hastiest reader with a false impression'.<sup>15</sup> Yet, *Charity Main* alongside the work of Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter is charged by Supple as concentrating on a narrow range of social relationships and realities, and therefore obscuring the reality of mining life.

Despite Supple's own criticism of sociological surveys, his chapter continues to present 'however superficially' the general characteristics of mining communities and in doing so confines his study to equally narrow lines.<sup>16</sup> Differences in experience clearly did occur. However, it would indeed be a task outside of the scope of this research to understand the unique features of each mining settlement or region. Supple is correct in highlighting the need to explore the individual characteristics of mining communities. However, it is perhaps equally fruitful to understand why general accounts have come to dominate their portrayal. To this end, it is the general and not the individual which remains the focus of this chapter.



Figure 35  
Norman Cornish  
*A Durham Colliery Village*  
Oil on board

As suggested, claims for the homogeneity of communities often rest upon the economic structure and the dominance of one trade or industry as the major source

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<sup>15</sup> Benney, *Charity Main* p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Supple, *History of British Coal Industry*, pp 425-426.

of employment. In mining districts where economic activity was wholly centred on the extraction of coal, the pit was to form the nucleus of community life. Not only did the pit dictate the working pattern of the community, it also influenced its political, cultural, domestic and social life. In what Supple succinctly describes as a 'web of identification' the pit and its affairs impinged upon every aspect of social life and community development. It was a symbiosis which reinforced a 'distinctive homogeneity of social structure and attitude.'<sup>17</sup> This web of identification and the linking of work and community was 'forged and continuously shaped by the economic geography of coalmining -its exceptional degree of concentration and specialisation, and the relatively undifferentiated nature of its economic concerns and social relationships.'<sup>18</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed in the findings of Chas Critcher, David Waddington and Maggie Wykes.

The predominance of mining as the local industry produces occupational homogeneity among people in the village. The characteristic forces and relations of production provide the structural basis for a militant industrial and political culture... The same structural basis also gives rise to solitary social relations.<sup>19</sup>

In describing mining communities as socially set apart, commentators placed great emphasis upon the value of certain institutions. For instance, Bill Williamson depicts the mining settlement as a 'constructed community' based upon central institutions such as the co-op, clubs and the church. The value of these institutions centred upon the symbolic boundaries they provided, 'these institutions' argues Williamson, 'were woven into the daily patterns of their everyday lives'.<sup>20</sup>

Sociological surveys of mining communities have largely interpreted colliery life as one of cultural coherence in which the internal compatibility of cultural components directly impact upon the degree of social uniformity. The downward conflation of culture is the standard interpretation of mining community life. For example Barry Supple's depiction of the mining community as a 'web of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>19</sup> Critcher, Waddington, Wykes, *Split at the Seams?* p.13.

<sup>20</sup> Williamson, *Class, Culture and Community*, p. 77



identification' reflects anthropological studies which have similarly portrayed an inherent harmony within the whole cultural system.<sup>21</sup>

The physical isolation of the mining community is often used to explain its unique social development but also its apparent cultural separateness. The degree in which mining communities were perceived as set apart meant they were commonly regarded as being 'peculiar'. Harold Heslop described this peculiarity in terms of a vulnerability in which miners appeared culturally introverted, 'Miners are a peculiar breed of men. They live in such dramatic and close association with each other, huddled together against a swaying wall, warming themselves at the fires of their own companionship.'<sup>22</sup> Richard Redmayne also commented upon the effect of isolation and how as a result 'the miners have come to possess an outlook on life and many characteristics peculiar to themselves'.<sup>23</sup>

This image of cultural isolation, however, does not remain unchallenged. Rab Houston provides evidence relating to seventeenth century Scottish mining communities of a degree of cultural assimilation with other working class occupational groups. Through local records Houston demonstrates how instead of being social outcasts mineworkers shared a range of attitudes and activities with artisans and agricultural workers. He claims that the picture of coal workers as brutal, unruly and socially set apart is one propagated by their enemies and has since been perpetuated in historical analyses which regard them as curiosities.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Archer, M. (1988) *Culture and Agency The place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Archer cites Evans-Pritchard whose study refers to the culture of the Azande as a 'web of belief' in which 'every strand depends upon every other strand. Evans-Pritchard quoted in Archer p.339. See also Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1937) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Heslop, H. (1994) Croft, A and Rigby, G. Ed. *Out of the Old Earth*, Newcastle: Bloodaxe, p.25.

<sup>23</sup> Redmayne, R, (1942) *Men, Mines and Memories*, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd. p. 9. The notion that mining communities were a race apart became an established theme as early as the fifteenth century. One suggestion as to the origins of this outlook arises in the mistrust of Tudor and Stuart officials against inhabitants of heath, forest and fell areas. The implication being that these areas were deemed outside of the control of authorities but were also the principal areas of industrial development. Clearly the stereotype gained greater currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth century until it was firmly established in current modern literature. Levine, D. and Wrightson, K. (1991) *The making of an Industrial Society, Whickham 1560-1765*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 275.

<sup>24</sup> Houston, R. (January 1983) 'Coal, Class and Culture; labour relations in a Scottish mining community, 1650-1750', in *Social History*, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp.1-18.

Of course the extent to which mining communities have intentionally represented themselves as set apart is certainly a factor which has contributed to the propagation of this myth. Rob Colls's analysis of popular song confirms how the Northern pitman often revelled in his self-propagated caricature.<sup>25</sup> The inhabitants of mining communities often appeared to encourage a degree of distinction. Manley noted this internal sense of distinction, 'The impression goes very much deeper than the superficial similarity in appearance. Their faces are grimed with coal dust, their clothes all seem to be of the same colour; the same grime has reduced all their blues and blacks to one common hue; but all is skin-deep compared with their sense of being a different, distinct community'.<sup>26</sup> An integral part of regional identity is a sense of distinctiveness and detachment from the rest of the country and particularly the South.

Hoggart's analysis of working class attitudes, 'drawn mainly from experience in the urban north' is of great relevance here.<sup>27</sup> Russell describes the work as providing a 'sociology of mass culture-cum-autobiography of Hunslet life'.<sup>28</sup> The introduction to the work identifies significant issues relating to the study of the working class. To begin with Hoggart warns against the romanticising of working class life in which the 'admirable qualities' are over stressed resulting in literary and journalistic 'folksy ballyhoo'.<sup>29</sup> Historians, in Hoggart's view are equally likely to overrate cultural activities as they lack an understanding of the 'grass-roots of that life.'<sup>30</sup> In contrast sociologists can often utilise the statistical evidence to depict communities but fail to decipher beyond the figures and establish what those habits actually stand for. Clearly for Hoggart the outsider is consistently faced with the 'obvious risks of misinterpretation'.<sup>31</sup>

In 'The Myth of cultural Integration' Margaret Archer criticises anthropologists and sociologists for their failure to distinguish between cultural system integration

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<sup>25</sup> Colls, R. (1977) *The Collier's Rant, Song and Culture in the industrial village*, London: Croom Helm, p.56.

<sup>26</sup> Manley, E.R. (1947) *Meet the Miner a Study of the Yorkshire miner at work, at home, and in public life*, with illustrations by the author and Michael Groser, Wakefield: published by the author, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of literacy*, p.20.

<sup>28</sup> Russell, *Looking North*, p.29.

<sup>29</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* p.15, 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

and socio-cultural integration.<sup>32</sup> Archer highlights the resulting conceptual confusion in the work of anthropologists and the analysis of primitive societies. From this she identifies two common misconceptions relating to culture; firstly that a cultural pattern exists which is based upon an underlying unity and fundamental coherence, and secondly, the identification of uniform action linked to and stemming from the cultural pattern which results in social homogeneity. Archer argues that the two aspects are logically and empirically distinct. However, the failure to distinguish them has had far reaching consequences within sociology.<sup>33</sup>

Anthropologists, Archer claims, have mistakenly viewed the predominance of routine, repetition and reproduction in the traditional community as evidence of high cultural system integration. The inadequacies of such studies can easily be transferred over to those which address cultural integration within mining communities. For example, Archer argues that high cultural system integration is consistently being confused with high socio-cultural integration. She cites Nazi Germany as an example of perceived behavioural uniformity which co-existed with 'substantial doctrinal inconsistencies and significant mental reservations in the population.'<sup>34</sup>

In Archer's proposed analytical dualism the two elements of coherence and consensus remain distinct. However, interconnections at and between the two different levels are possible. In mining communities the distinction is of vital importance as it refutes the sociologist's advance commitment to cultural coherence whilst also allowing for the understanding of inconsistencies and alternatives to the cultural system or indeed differentiation to and the possibility of altering socio-cultural integration. In doing this Archer attempts to demolish the 'illusion foisted on traditional life that its regularities are orchestrated by an overarching cultural system.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In Archer's model she distinguishes Cultural System Integration (internal compatibility between the components of culture such as knowledge, language, beliefs) with Socio-Cultural Integration (degree of social uniformity produced by the imposition of culture by one set of people on another).

<sup>33</sup> Archer, *Culture and Agency*, p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> Archer, M, (1985) 'The Myth of Cultural Integration' in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol xxxvi, number 3, p. 337

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

In the case of mining communities the myth of cultural integration appears advanced and to a large degree irreversible. Accounts firmly regulate the intricacies and patterns of the coalfield as attributable to an overarching cultural system even though, as Archer makes clear, the reality may be far removed from this. It is apparent that the wider theoretical debate surrounding community and culture is both vast and complicated. Whilst the uniformity presented within accounts of coalfield communities remains questionable, there appears an overwhelming desire by both inhabitants and observers to develop and support this image of cultural coherence.

Within the North East, the historic perception of social coherence contributes significantly to regional identity and also helps to explain the successful reception of Cornish's work today. From an early point in his career, Cornish focussed upon the community life of Spennymoor as his subject matter. His interest in community has remained consistent throughout his career. It is worth noting this to highlight that Cornish's visual description of the region is not just a retrospective creation following the decline of mining. That such an interpretation was popularly received also suggests that local audiences recognised and adhered to a contemporaneous understanding of community.

### **Cornish's Community.**

Cornish's interpretation of mining life is clearly based upon a strong notion of a homogeneous community. His paintings and sketches of Spennymoor conform strictly to the popular view of mining life as documented by numerous sociologists and historians. This section will identify the key themes within Cornish's portrayal of community and demonstrate how they complement the wider perceptions relating to the mining community. Cornish's involvement at the age of 14 with the work of the Spennymoor Settlement was to be influential in the artist's understanding of community.<sup>36</sup> During the years of Depression, Cornish was exposed to the

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<sup>36</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement which had been established to counteract the negative aspects of social dislocation and unemployment focused directly upon fostering a sense of community. Cornish's experience of Settlement life together with the realities of the interwar Depression undoubtedly shaped Cornish's perception of the community he lived in. Cornish tellingly describes his first marital home in Catherine Street, Spennymoor, 'It was a real old fashioned street. People tended to help one

philanthropic beliefs of William Farrell who not only encouraged a socially supportive mindset amongst members but crucially focussed the young artist's attention toward depicting the community life of Spennymoor.

This sense of community is most vivid amongst Cornish's street and bar room scenes. In these works community is shown in harmonious co-operation. Regarded as a masculine retreat, the pub is seen as providing sanctuary to the miner. It is a place where miners could relax and reminisce about past experiences. Cornish would often sit quietly in the corner and sketch these men as they recalled tales from the past. Miners are often represented as brutal drunks, frittering away money on gambling and alcohol. However, as was often the case the daily visit to the local public house was more a form of social escapism.<sup>37</sup> Cornish depicts the drunken miner within his art, but he does so in a humorous way. The image *Drunk on railings* (figure 36) shows a drunken miner using the railings to prop himself up whilst his arms hang loosely. The drunk, however, is not presented as being aggressive or brutish but as more of a comical sight to onlookers.



Figure 36  
Norman Cornish  
*Drunk on railings*  
Oil on board

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another. They had all known adversity, but it had not killed off their sense of humour.' Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p.22.

<sup>37</sup> Redmayne, *Men, Mines, and Memories*, p.17 and Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p. 2.

Cornish portrays the sociability of frequenting the pub in his sketches. Indeed, it is said he often became so engrossed in capturing the scene that his pint glass and its contents of Newcastle Brown Ale remained untouched. The vibrancy and liveliness of *Spennymoor Bar Scene* (figure 37) is emphasised by Cornish's use of warm earthy tones.



Figure 37  
Norman Cornish  
*Spennymoor Bar Scene*  
Pastel

In comparison the street served as a place of unity for women. The importance of the street as a communal meeting place and as an extension of the female domestic sphere is recurrent within both Cornish's art and contemporary literary accounts. *Bishop's Close Street* (figure 38) is a typical Cornish street scene. Such a depiction is supported by literary accounts. For example, on visiting the region in the 1930s Thomas Sharp noted how,

The back streets contain all the life and movement of a pit village... In the back streets women gossip at their doors, tradesmen pass with their carts, men sit at corners in the traditional attitude of buttocks on heels, and children play and shout at their games.<sup>38</sup>

Located six miles north-east of Bishop Auckland, Spennymoor was one of the largest mining towns in the Durham coalfield. It was 'a long straggling place with little

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<sup>38</sup> Sharp, T. (1935) *A Derelict Area: A Study of the South West Durham Coalfield*, London: L and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press, p.19-20.

depth of housing behind its main street'.<sup>39</sup> On visiting the town in the Depression years the *Morning Post* correspondent described how even before those years, Spennymoor was regarded as a

poor shrivelled sort of place. It looked as though it were hugging itself for warmth and barely succeeding. It might have been an overgrown doll's house, except that it was impossible to slide away the front for extra light, and no doll's house would have looked so dark and forbidding.<sup>40</sup>



Figure 38  
Norman Cornish  
*Bishops Close Street*  
Oil

In 1976, Clive Taylor and Alan Townsend's survey noted how inhabitants had a 'strong attachment and identity with Spennymoor [which] seems to be connected with behaviour patterns associated with a long established traditional, socially homogeneous 'community'.<sup>41</sup> A very different situation was recorded by William Farrell in his *First Report on the Settlement* for the years 1931-32. Farrell noted 'it is not a Town...it is merely a heterogeneous collection of people living in badly built houses scarcely one of whom is aware of anything lacking'.<sup>42</sup> Within the same report Farrell concluded 'There is little or no communal life, and class and religious distinctions are strongly marked. It has never been anybody's job to think of the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Morning Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1934.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, C. and Townsend, A. (1976) 'The local 'Sense of Place' as evidenced in North East England' in *Urban Studies*, 13. p.144.

<sup>42</sup> Spennymoor Settlement, First Annual Report (1931-1932) p.1. DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.



place as a Town'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, if Spennymoor had been a town completely devoid of community spirit, the success of the Settlement would have proved virtually impossible.

Farrell's arrival in the town of Spennymoor was under the auspices of the Pilgrim Trust. His brief was to survey conditions within the Durham Coalfield with the aim of establishing a Toynbee Hall type settlement within the region. Farrell noted how the County 'for the most part is bleak and barren'.<sup>44</sup> In Spennymoor he found the ideal location for the establishment of a settlement, for not only were there high levels of unemployment but also a lack of communal life. In describing the mutual support essential for the success of the Settlement's activities, Farrell writes, '...much tact and gentle persuasion was necessary to convince the members of the groups that, placing upon its lowest level, it was only playing the game, it was only common loyalty to the others to continue attending a group when once it had been formed: the co-operative spirit so necessary for the life of Study Groups was emphasised, and the members responded to this "communal duty" stimulus'.<sup>45</sup>

That Farrell was able to make an appeal based upon community spirit suggests that within Spennymoor some sense of community did actually exist. Although Spennymoor was described as a 'scarred and forgettable colliery town', Farrell in his eagerness to secure funding quickly noted the suitability of the area as fertile ground for the establishment of a Settlement.<sup>46</sup> The chapter will now examine the key elements of mining communities and Spennymoor in particular. The themes discussed here reflect those highlighted by researchers such as Supple and Williamson, as indicating the distinctiveness of the coalfield community and include the development of industry, the cultural routines and strict social and gender divisions within employment and leisure.

In Kelly's *Directory of Durham* 1890, Spennymoor was described as a place which 'has rapidly advanced in importance, wealth and population, owing to the product of coal and the establishment of the Weardale Iron and Coal Co, who

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>44</sup> Farrell, W. Copy of the First Report For File 28<sup>th</sup> April 1931, p. 1. DUL ASC GB-033-SPE

<sup>45</sup> Spennymoor Settlement, First Annual Report (1931-1932) p.1-2. DUL ASC GB-033-SPE

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, H. (1976) *Durham Villages*, London: Hale, p. 92.



employ many hundred men: in a few years it has risen from an obscure township into a wealthy town.<sup>47</sup> Heavy industry remained for most of the twentieth century the largest source of employment within the region. The location of communities in relation to industry was instrumental in deciding the class composition of an area. Overwhelmingly, this resulted in localities whose population was almost entirely composed of the working class. County Durham was comprised of many communities such as Spennymoor whose existence was dependent upon their distance from industry and the supply of a workforce. In County Durham, forty-six percent of the adult male population were employed as miners and in certain localities this figure came to represent seventy-five percent of male employment.<sup>48</sup> In Spennymoor it has been estimated that sixty percent of men worked as mineworkers. Surrounded as the town was by seven pits, there was clearly little by way of an alternative.<sup>49</sup>

Community spirit was both created and nurtured by the development of one class towns. Added to this, low levels of mobility ensured that generations of a family often remained in the same village as long as there was sufficient employment to sustain them. Working class immobility is in turn acknowledged as encouraging close kinship ties and mutual support, 'The relative immobility of the working classes (in every sense: personal mobility, occupational mobility and residential mobility) is a particularly important factor. Immobility results in a strengthening of *vertical* bonds of kinship and *horizontal* bonds of friendship'.<sup>50</sup>

Joanna Bourke, however, points out that it would be incorrect to assume that just because there are low levels of spatial mobility and high population density that there was an identifiable working class community.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, she argues that close proximity to neighbours does not always create identification between the individual and the group and in many cases results in rivalry and competition. Whilst both points are valid, it perhaps is worth considering that in the majority of cases the result of low levels of mobility and the density of working class environments fostered

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<sup>47</sup> Kelly's *Directory of Durham* (1890) London: Kellys.

<sup>48</sup> Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 479-480. Bulmer, *Mining and Social Change* p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Sharp, *Derelict Area*, p. 29

<sup>50</sup> Knox, *Urban Social Geography*, p.250.

<sup>51</sup> Bourke, J. (1994) *Working class cultures in Britain 1890-1960*, London: Routledge, p.140.

a natural association with family members and a strong identification with class, which ultimately created a sense of belonging.

One particular feature of living in close proximity to other family members was that the family unit often provided a domestic platform for women to exert control over domestic matters. As Knox explains,

The high degree of residential propinquity between family members in working class areas not only makes for greater intensity of interaction between family members in working class areas but also facilitates the important role of the matriarch in reinforcing kinship bonds. The matriarch has traditionally played a key role by providing practical support (e.g. looking after grandchildren)...and by passing on attitudes, information beliefs and norms of behaviour.<sup>52</sup>

The domestic role of the pitman's wife was essentially woven into her identity and her routine was very much dictated to by the demands of mining shift work. It was widely upheld that through hard work and domestic efficiency, women achieved self respect and recognition within the community.<sup>53</sup> The idea that 'cleanliness was next to Godliness' had weight in many mining communities.

Tommy Turnbull describes vividly his Grandma Turnbull and her role in the family,

Every one of them [her sons] was a miner so there was always somebody going out and somebody coming in, and she was up at half past four every day to see to them. You could never see the fire for all the boiling pots on it and the clotheshorses all around and the whole place was as steamy as a laundry. When one of the lads came back for his dinner, off would come one pot with the washing in and on would go the one with the broth. On and off they went all day long, and the only time she went to bed was on a Saturday night. The rest of the week she just slept in her chair in the kitchen until the latch on the door went.<sup>54</sup>

Turnbull concluded the universality of this situation, 'You walk into any pit house at ten o' clock at night and you'd find the same thing. A red hot fire, a tired-looking woman, and heavy damp clothes hanging up all over the place'.<sup>55</sup> Women were in

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<sup>52</sup> Knox, *Urban Social Geography*, p. 250.

<sup>53</sup> Crow, G. and Allan, G. (1994) *Community Life*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, p. 43. Bourke, *Working class cultures*, p. 161.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson, R. (1996) *Tommy Turnbull A Miner's Life*, Newcastle: TUPS, p. 6

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

Sid Chaplin's words subordinated to a 'relentless' and 'hellish shift system'.<sup>56</sup> The pressure placed upon the miner's wife was acknowledged by Cornish. *Tired Woman* (figure 39) shows Sarah Cornish with her head in her hands and her hair dishevelled.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 39  
Norman Cornish  
*Tired Woman*  
*Women*  
Stone Gallery, 1966<sup>58</sup>

Within his art, Cornish depicts women in either a domestic setting or as part of a street scene. His wife Sarah is shown as she sews, peels vegetables, or cares for the children. The women included in street scenes are often shown accompanying small children or pushing a pram. Cornish defines women in a domestic and maternal context and in doing so supports the written descriptions detailed above. Cornish also shows female networks evolving through street activity where the back lane often acts as an extension of the home and women's sphere of influence.

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<sup>56</sup> Chaplin, S. (1950) *The Thin Seam*, London: Phoenix House, p. 24.

<sup>57</sup> Cornish's particular depiction of Sarah is considered in chapter five. It is argued here that the portrayal of his wife reinforces the wider perception of a female's domestic role within the mining community.

<sup>58</sup> The image 'Tired Woman' was featured in an article which promoted the exhibition and was printed in *The Sunday Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1968.

Figures 40 and 41 *Drawings taken from Cornish's Sketchbook*, demonstrate the intimacy between mother and child in the domestic sphere. They reflect an important aspect of female identity within the mining community. Sarah is shown bathing John and in the second sketch the young boy watches his mother sewing. The images reveal the tenderness between mother and son which is often missed in Cornish's larger street scenes.



Figure 40



Figure 41

Drawings taken from Cornish's sketchbook.

The Spennymoor Settlement recognised the insular and limiting attitude towards women within mining communities and set about taking active steps in breaking down this divide. At the outset, Farrell noted 'the average Durham Miner's attitude to his women-folk is little better than medieval, and by mixing the groups occasionally it is hoped to convince some of the men that their women-folk have brains and desires which carry them further than small-house drudgery'.<sup>59</sup> Theatre provided the Settlement's opportunity to narrow the gender divide and was the main activity in which both men and women participated fully together. Farrell often

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<sup>59</sup> Through the Settlement's annual reports, the extent of female involvement can be clearly monitored. By the time of the Second Annual Report, a section of the publication was dedicated to the activities of the Settlement women. This would suggest a growth in the involvement of women in settlement activities. The inclusion of this section in the annual report follows a similar pattern to other working class movements who published on a regular basis, notably the *Co-operative News*. The guidance of the women at the settlement was largely supervised by Mrs Farrell. This would perhaps suggest a reinforcement of gender divisions especially as the interests of the women's groups were largely focused upon what was regarded as traditional female pursuits such as embroidery and handicrafts. In many ways, settlement activity merely represented an extension of the domestic sphere. Spennymoor Settlement Second Annual Report, (1932-1933), DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

regarded women to be more responsive and quicker in acquiring stage technique.<sup>60</sup> The co-opting of two women from the handicrafts group onto the 'working committee' of the Settlement also attempted to bridge the obvious gender divide. Within the Settlement movement female networks developed which offered mutual support. These links quickly developed; within the first year the female members of the Spennymoor Settlement had made connections with the women's group of the Seaham Settlement and had even visited these ladies at their Rock House premises.<sup>61</sup>

Proximity to the source of employment ensured that industry was a visual feature which dominated the landscape. Cornish was particularly interested with this image and the pithead features regularly in his art work such as *Colliery Gantry* (figure 42). Discussing this scene, Cornish writes,

The men climbing the steps with their oil lamps looked like fireflies trapped in a great steel spider's web. As the shunting engine passed below them, they became lost in a cloud of steam, which reflected the arched window lights of the colliery like a cinema screen.<sup>62</sup>

E.R. Manley in his 1947 account of Yorkshire mining life focused upon the negative aspects of the colliery yard. The pit dominated the landscape of the mining community and even if you could not see the pit you could hear the buzzer. The colliery yard was a physical and visual feature which acted as a focal point forming the nucleus of community life. Tommy Turnbull explains the central place it occupied within the community,

Everybody told the time by the colliery buzzer...Most of the time it was a very homely and comforting sound. It was the pit calling out to the women at home to tell them their men were coming home, and that they could start setting the table. It meant the pit was in business and the men were in work. Everybody listened to the buzzer, they planned their lives around it.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1934.

<sup>61</sup> Spennymoor Settlement, First Annual Report, 1931-32 p. 5, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

<sup>62</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Turnbull, *A Miner's Life*, p. 19.

For Chaplin the pit buzzer represented the sound of survival, 'The call of the buzzer may as well have said "Bread and Butter" or, as you like it, "Beer and Baccy!"' <sup>64</sup>



Figure 42  
Norman Cornish  
*Colliery Gantry*  
Oil on pastel

Bonds linking the miner to the colliery were strengthened further if the miner and his family lived in a colliery-owned property. This was illustrated by Cornish who was fearful that living in a colliery house would bind him to the pit and this was to prove especially alarming as his professional artistic career began to take root. <sup>65</sup> It is estimated that between a quarter and a third of housing in the main coalmining areas was owned by the colliery. Forty percent of colliery-owned property was located within the Northumberland and Durham coalfields. This was in marked contrast with South Wales where there was traditionally high levels of home ownership. <sup>66</sup> Home ownership was a complicated issue. Whilst much of this property was rent free, it was often a very poor standard and ultimately meant that the miner was reliant upon the colliery to provide his family with a home. <sup>67</sup> Leaving the pit obviously equated to the loss of the family home.

<sup>64</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*, p.27.

<sup>65</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 457.

<sup>67</sup> The North East has traditionally been regarded as having some of the worst levels of overcrowding. In terms of housing, however, closeness to industry was clearly pragmatic for the employees but was equally useful for managers who hoped to exert social control and most importantly reduce absenteeism. *Ibid.*, p. 462.



In *Colliery Back Street* (figure 43) Cornish demonstrates the proximity of mining and its visual impact on the residential dwellings of inhabitants. In this image there is barely a distinction between industry and residential property. The street slopes away to reveal the slag heap overshadowing the houses whilst the activity of the street continues. The slag heap provides a visual reminder of the importance of the pit as a key institution to the survival of this community.



Figure 43  
Norman Cornish  
*Colliery Back Street*  
Watercolour

As a miner, the pit formed a natural focus for Cornish's work. The underground world of the mine, however, was equally a source of fascination for visitors to mining communities. The impact of such an experience was profound. E. R. Manley described how 'the first sight of a mining village had a shattering and permanent effect on my whole social and political outlook'.<sup>68</sup> Redmayne's experience

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<sup>68</sup> Manley, *Meet the Miner*, p. 113.

was equally devastating. For him it was a baptism of fire which he would never forget.<sup>69</sup>

For those miners who faced the pit every day, a complex attitude of reverence, loathing and obsession developed. The pit symbolically came to represent a world separated from the outside community. Chaplin argued that the change into pit clothing was more than just a physical adjustment, 'A man takes off his clean clothes and puts on his pit-gear. That's all; but between the act lies a lost world...A tree on the skyline, and a farmhouse cuddling into the hillside for sleep. The soft outlines. The lost'.<sup>70</sup>

E.R Manley amplifies this point further as he describes the miners getting onto the colliery bus, 'The bus pulls up at the road-side, where there is a solid mass of men humped together in the gloom. There comes a grim surge and a clatter of heavy boots; the bus fills with silent, tired, over-coated figures who take possession'.<sup>71</sup> The uniformity of clothing and action suggests that there is something which distinguishes and sets these men apart. Manley likens the miners to a 'solid mass', a theme which holds resonance with many artistic interpretations of the miners. Once again miners are illustrated as being other worldly, almost spectral. In this case there is something sinister and grim in the way in which he describes the pitmen as 'taking possession' of the bus.

In Cornish's *Trimdon Grange Colliery* (figure 44) the proximity of the pit to community life is emphasised. Street activity focuses upon mothers and prams, children playing and various groups as they chat to one another. The clothes of the women are bright and colourful against the grey monotony of the sky, the mud track and the pit buildings in the background. Miners are shown walking in single file across the bridge over the railway track to reach the colliery yard. They are painted in grey and as the miners reach the top their outlines fade into the sky. The miners are set apart and as they cross over into the colliery they disappear into a different world which exists separately from the community that surrounds it. A natural gender

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<sup>69</sup> Redmayne, *Men, Mines and Memories*, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*, p.16.

<sup>71</sup> Manley, *Meet the Miner*, p. 6.



divide is noticeable within the picture. The left half featuring the pit represents the masculine world of work. This is in contrast with the right half of the image in which the street represents domestic family life and is populated mainly with women, pushchairs and children. The image symbolises the divisions within community life whilst also accentuating a sense of solidarity.



Figure 44  
Norman Cornish  
*Trimdon Grange Colliery*  
Watercolour

The nature of pit work, its physical pressures and inherent dangers led Cornish to describe miners as ‘industrial gladiators- with strict codes of behaviour’.<sup>72</sup> These strict rules of behaviour encompassed many aspects of pit work from everyday working practices to the deep loyalty shared between workmates. Harold Heslop describes his introduction to a specific rule of the pit, walking in single line, ‘This was my initiation into the most important rite of the men of the mine, the keeping in single file when travelling. Nowhere was it so rigorously enforced as in the coal mines. A miner was not at ease when confronted by a stranger’s light’.<sup>73</sup> Cornish also describes his initiation to the workings of the pit,

<sup>72</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Heslop, *Out of the Old Earth*, p. 99.

As the years passed, the rules and customs of the colliery became familiar to me. The coal seam I worked was in the old fashioned bord and pillar method...they [miners] picked their own workmates or 'marrers', in sets of six men, working two men in each of three shifts. Each quarter year the cavils were drawn like a lottery with working places drawn from a hat. The men were obliged to work the cavil drawn for the next twelve to fourteen weeks whether it was good or bad, wet or dry.<sup>74</sup>

Male bonding was a prerequisite for pitmen, 'To be someone's marra was to be more than just his work mate. More of a comrade, someone who could be relied upon in times of trouble, whether at the pit or at home'.<sup>75</sup> Chaplin echoes the importance of being someone's marra in the final scenes of *The Thin Seam* with the death of Christopher Jack's work-mate Art. Jack expresses how the close bond between miners makes the death of a colleague all the more painful, 'And because I had companioned with him I shared in this death, and shuddered under the strict discipline'.<sup>76</sup> The sense of duty in being someone's marra was deep rooted and often worked as an extension of the family in the workplace. Cornish describes how on one particular occasion there were inaccuracies in his team's pay. In order to rectify the problem, the men were required to return to the colliery office later that evening. Cornish describes how having returned home exhausted he received a large cheque for sales of paintings, equal to about twenty to thirty weeks wages. It seemed ridiculous to him to return to the colliery office to fight over a few shillings. However, Cornish writes '...I could not do otherwise. I was a member of a team of workmen and an intense loyalty bound me to them'.<sup>77</sup>

For young boys the pit featured significantly in their childhood even before their working lives had started, so much so that ultimately there was a sense of inevitability about embarking upon a career down the pit. 'The colliery bred its own workers', remarked Heslop.<sup>78</sup> Chaplin interestingly describes how as children 'Our dream and whole life's ambition was to be high-ranking putters...'<sup>79</sup> Once again,

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<sup>74</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life* p. 6. As far as geologic variations were concerned cavilling provided the fairest way to decide which areas the men were to mine. It was an egalitarian principle which governed an otherwise hierarchical working environment.

<sup>75</sup> Temple, D, (1994) *Colliers of Durham*, Volume I, Newcastle: TUPS, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin seam*, p. 149.

<sup>77</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Heslop, *Out of the old Earth*, p. 43.

<sup>79</sup> Chaplin, S. 'Durham Mining Villages' in Bulmer, M. ed. (1978) *Mining and Social Change*, London: Croom Helm Ltd, p. 68.

entry for a young boy into the pit symbolically came to represent a transition into manhood. Cornish describes the emblematic moment his working life began, 'I spent Christmas 1933 as a schoolboy with the rest of the family, but in the early hours of the following morning I was destined to a dramatic change. On Boxing Day 1933 at fourteen years of age I became a working man'.<sup>80</sup> The pit was in Chaplin's view 'the arena and testing ground where, for good or for ill, you found your rank and integrity'.<sup>81</sup>

The muscular exertion involved in mining provided a visual display of masculinity. Heslop writes, 'To watch a hewer was always a revelation for me, especially when in the low seams. In a place only twenty-two inches from the floor to roof, a man had to be agile and sure as he assumed the posture suitable for such a constriction of space'.<sup>82</sup> The visual image of the working miner clearly caught the imagination of artists as it typified the sheer force and energy but also the flexibility required to cope in such a restricted environment. Cornish's *Miner Sawing Prop* (figure 45) is a dark and sombre image which shows the hunched body of a miner working at the coal face. Of course as Manley points out, the walk to the face could be exhausting in itself, 'The miner's life is rough; his work dirty, dangerous and uninteresting. He may have to walk a couple of miles underground to the face, and the same journey back again after several hours of heavy exhaustion and, after his meal will drop asleep in his chair before having a bath.'<sup>83</sup> For the miner, 'Life was an unrelenting exercise of the muscles and recuperation in sleep, a search for some kind of enjoyment and the stark reality of labour'.<sup>84</sup> For a great number of miners living in Spennymoor, the Settlement was to satisfy this search for enjoyment.

Several writers, Chaplin especially, describe the pit in a particularly emotive way. Often these accounts demonstrate a reverence towards the pit through the use of biblical terminology. This is a point illustrated by John Harvey in his analysis of the Welsh coalfield, where miners often made reference to the 'pit of hell'.<sup>85</sup> Chaplin

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<sup>80</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 5

<sup>81</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages', in Bulmer, *Mining and Social Change* p. 69.

<sup>82</sup> Heslop, *Out of the Old Earth*, p. 128.

<sup>83</sup> Manley, *Meet the Miner*, p. 57. It has been estimated that the average walk to the coal face was over 30 minutes in each direction. Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 430.

<sup>84</sup> Heslop, *Out of the Old Earth*, p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p. 21.

again echoes this use of biblical description, 'As a child I thought pits were like the temple of Jerusalem, sort of created by God and had been there since time began. There was something divinely ordained about them and the mining villages had been there for all time'.<sup>86</sup> Alongside this reverence was a further set of emotions which revealed the brutality of the pit and of the tension expressed by the men who worked there. The contrast between the miner and the working lives of others, was according to Supple, 'a vital shaping force in the psychology and politics of the miners as a group...it was, indeed, the organisation and interrelationships of the work process itself which provided the critical determinant of the miners' life and outlook'.<sup>87</sup>

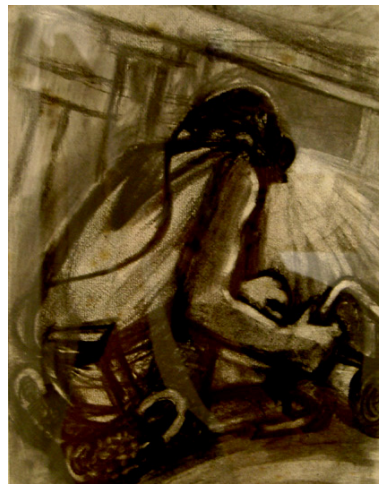


Figure 45  
Norman Cornish  
*Mining sawing prop*  
Charcoal on paper

Chaplin feminises the pit in a tone which is often sexually aggressive. In his novel, *The Thin Seam*, he describes how, 'The heat slaps you in the face then enfolds like a drab harlot, taking a full and final possession, so that then and there, so fierce is her embrace you feel like tearing off every particle of clothing...sucking at every pore with insatiable passion...till you're lathered by the hot bitch'.<sup>88</sup> Also quoting from this novel, the main character Christopher Jack describes how despite his desire to leave the pit altogether he was eventually driven back to its 'womb'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages' p. 62.

<sup>87</sup> Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p.430-1.

<sup>88</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*, p.63-64.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

Clearly there was a tension between miner and pit which was represented characteristically in the context of this strictly masculine environment as a form of aggression. Interestingly in the context of this male environment it is the feminised pit which dictated the situation. The miners were fully aware that this was a tension which was never balanced in favour of the miner, as Chaplin testifies when he describes how 'there was a sensual satisfaction in holding your place down there against *her* [the pit]'.<sup>90</sup> Resentment toward the pit was understandable; it was physical, dangerous, all consuming and shaped the miners' entire view of his life,

An inhuman time-table, a devilish system of fatigues, making men into pit-fodder, subordinating men...Pre-occupation with the daily task. Constant unremitting morbid talk about coal and coal-getting. Scratching the scab. An insular attitude toward other classes, other groups, 'the honour of the regiment and, so on'.<sup>91</sup>

This sense of resentment was compounded by the fact that pit work was unpredictable and the danger insurmountable. The pit was a monster that remained untamed, where men work 'in a bare sort of prison. A stone cell with darkness as bars. Beside you crouches the creature you tend for. A monster whose tail threads through a fissure in the rocks. Here is his belly boiling with oil'.<sup>92</sup>

The character of Christopher Jack in Chaplin's *The Thin Seam* describes how Grandma refused to read the fortunes of certain people, explaining how she 'dinna like tellin' for the men-folk'. Ultimately, Grandma referred to the omnipresent dangers of life working underground.<sup>93</sup> In areas where mining was the main source of employment, mining accidents and disasters could have a devastating effect on those families that experienced multiple deaths.<sup>94</sup> The futility of dying down the pit was a theme covered by Chaplin in *The Thin Seam*. The emotional dying words of

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<sup>90</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages', p. 69.

<sup>91</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>94</sup> Trimdon Grange Colliery Disaster was particularly tragic for the Burnett family who lost three sons aged 23, 19 and 17 years old. The tragedy provided the inspiration for Tommy Armstrong's verses 'The Trimdon Grange Disaster' in which he describes the grief of the family. It was clear that, despite improvements in mining safety, the dangers presented by the pit remained a constant feature of pit life. The Samuel Report published in 1926 provided figures which demonstrated that for every 100 men working for 20 years as a miner the probabilities were that 2 would be killed, 9 would suffer a major fracture or serious injury whilst 16 would incur a serious disease. Only shipping had a higher mortality rate than the coal industry. Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 427.

Art who has been fatally injured on the cutter picks epitomise a sense of pointlessness and resentment against the pit, "Why did they bring me into the world for this? They should scrap the cross and put Him [Christ] on the cutter-picks. His mother wouldn't watch him die like that. They didn't nail him in the belly like they did me'.<sup>95</sup>

Shared experience is perhaps the most vital element in forging a sense of community. Sid Chaplin described the impact of mining life, 'Well, the one thing about being born into a mining community is that 'ye knaa whe ye are'. You know who you spring from, you know who you belong to, your roots are firmly embedded'.<sup>96</sup> The development of community in mining settlements did not occur overnight nor did it grow at an even pace with industry. This social dislocation was placed into perspective by David Levine and Keith Wrightson in *The Making of an Industrial Society*, 'to sink a pit or build a wagon way took weeks or months. The reshaping of basic relationships and the recasting of fundamental attitudes took decades, even generations'.<sup>97</sup> Understandably the mining community that existed in the twentieth century not only reflected but was also rooted in the dramatic social upheaval and disjuncture which existed as a consequence of rapid industrial change. As a result of this, twentieth century mining communities were richly steeped in heritage and tradition.

'Common memories of hard times, accidents, and strikes helped to reinforce the obvious bonds of economic interest that held a mining community together'.<sup>98</sup> Economic divisions were understood to be less marked in the working class community where there was only one source of employment. The result was that 'the income of every mining family, in so far as it was derived from the mine, was known to everybody. The pretensions of urban living were impossible here'. Manley noted how 'good or bad times affect all the neighbours more or less equally, and as long as

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<sup>95</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*, p.149.

<sup>96</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages', p.60.

<sup>97</sup> Levine and Wrightson, *The making of an Industrial Society*, p. 429.

<sup>98</sup> Gregory, R. (1968) *The Miners and British politics, 1906-1914*, Oxford: Oxford university Press, p. 3.

a family doesn't begin to put on airs and is prepared to share its news with the village, there are no social taboos'.<sup>99</sup>

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood utilised the findings of Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter and their analysis of Ashton to demonstrate strong social linkage through group membership. Douglas and Isherwood pointed out that despite many miners in the community earning above their average wage, a saving culture could not be identified. They argued that the 'surplus wages were skimmed off in convivial entertainment of their mates, in betting, and in subscriptions to many charitable and social activities. It was a high consumption-low saving economy.'<sup>100</sup> The indifference to saving or investing this extra money into the home or consumer goods reflected the need to retain solidarity with other workers. It was not acceptable to visually demonstrate wealth as an individual. Consumption in this instance is social and is governed by cultural conventions.

Likewise Taylor emphasises the conventions which governed money lending and reciprocity. During the interwar period, mutual support between neighbours often came in the form of spare food. However, it was understood that this support would be reciprocated.<sup>101</sup> This point is highlighted by Douglas and Isherwood, '...if a man is temporarily short of cash, he will accept drinks from a friend, but he will be honour-bound to repay.'<sup>102</sup> The solidarity displayed here brought external praise, 'The characteristic of the miners that has most impressed the outside world is their solidarity. Their outlook on life may be narrow, they may be inarticulate and slow to understand, they can certainly be obstinate and stubborn, but there is no doubt that they know how to 'stick together'.<sup>103</sup>

Historical continuity forged an 'insular intensity of life and work' within mining communities.<sup>104</sup> During Johnson's stay in the community of *Charity Main* he

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<sup>99</sup> Manley, *Meet the Miner*, p.63.

<sup>100</sup> Douglas, M. and Isherwood, B. (1996) *The World of Goods, Towards an Anthropology of Goods*, New York: Routledge, p.124.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor, A. (2002) *Working Class Credit and Community since 1918*, New York: Palgrave, p. 25-26, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Douglas and Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, p.125.

<sup>103</sup> Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics*, p 1.

<sup>104</sup> Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 487.

repeatedly encounters amongst the miners a strong sense of tradition and heritage which permeated the whole community, 'The customs of the community, both underground and on the surface, were old and honoured for their age; the double isolation of craft and geography had turned these people in upon themselves, so that they took their standards from their forebears instead of from strangers'.<sup>105</sup> In the male dominated club, this sense of heritage develops into a generational knowledge which is passed from father to son,

More than most men, too, the miners Johnson talked with in the Club had a sense of the past. Their fathers and grandfathers had been miners, and had talked to them of their craft, as old Tom now talked with young Norman; and out of the long evenings of pit talk reaching back through generations had developed something like a tribal memory.<sup>106</sup>

Cornish's respect for and fascination with his elders, particularly those men who worked down the pit, is revealed by their repeated inclusion in his sketches such as *Two old men with woolly mufflers* (figure 46). The generational knowledge of patriarchs in the work place and matriarchs in the domestic sphere stressed the importance of past struggles and impressed upon younger generations a strong industrial heritage. The sharing of knowledge within mining communities ensured the continuance of a distinct and collective understanding of the past.



Figure 46  
Norman Cornish  
*Two old men with woolly mufflers*  
Pen on paper

<sup>105</sup> Benney, *Charity Main*, p.122.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.



This historical continuity was reinforced by both communal and regional shows of solidarity. The most visual display of heritage and unity was the Durham Miners' Gala which still takes place today. This annual event dating back to 1871 was an institution to the mining communities of the North East. 'Even throughout the years of depression the miners remained steadfastly loyal to their tradition of demonstrating their solidarity and determination to better their conclusion'.<sup>107</sup> The Gala was to become the subject of Cornish's largest commission completed in 1963 which is to be discussed in chapter five.

Commentators saw mining communities largely in terms of unique and prevailing attitudes particularly in association with religion and politics. Mining communities were portrayed as areas which subscribed to Methodism, demonstrated strong support for the Labour party and strictly conformed to trade unionism. Religion and particularly Methodism served a multifarious role within the working class mining community. Interestingly the support for the Labour party almost disrupted the Settlement's Parliamentary Club's debate. Difficulty was encountered by Farrell when none of the men would agree to argue from the Conservative government's side of 'The House' during a Parliamentary Club debate. The story is both humorous but also indicative of the prevalent attitudes regarding politics.<sup>108</sup> An article from *The Times* concluded that in 1934, 'Resentment exists among thoughtful people against the comfortable South because it is alleged that the South governs in ignorance'.<sup>109</sup>

The interwar period is clearly recognised as a period of dramatic social, economic and political change. Importantly, mining communities were at the centre of the social problem in the depressed areas.<sup>110</sup> Several academic accounts of this period attempt to banish the persuasive myth of the 'hungry-thirties' in favour of a more simplistic North-South divide in which direct contrasts can be drawn between 'the relatively prosperous towns of southern England and the depressed areas'.<sup>111</sup> Similar sentiments are echoed throughout studies of this period and the particularly

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<sup>107</sup> Fynes, R. (1873) *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham: a history of their social and political progress*, Blyth: John Robinson, p. 297.

<sup>108</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement First Annual Report (1931-32) p.6. DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

<sup>109</sup> 'Places without a Future' *The Times*, March, 1934.

<sup>110</sup> Supple, *History of the British Coal Industry*, p. 462.

<sup>111</sup> Stevenson, J and Cook, C. (1977) *The Slump, Society and Politics during the Depression*, London: Quartet Books, p.57.

hard hit community of Jarrow is consistently used as an example of prevalent conditions within the North East.<sup>112</sup>

When J. B. Priestley completed his *English Journey* in 1933, he concluded with a summary of the divisions he had encountered within England. His conclusions drew a sharp social and economic divide between the North and the South. The North of England and its 'thousands of rows of houses all alike', 'slums', 'slag heaps' and 'sooty little towns' was deeply opposed to the sense of prosperity and modernity experienced in the Southern counties.<sup>113</sup>

The local and national press fully documented the deplorable conditions which represented the everyday lives of thousands of families within the region. As early as 1925 the *Newcastle Chronicle* highlighted the plight of the small community of Newburn, where economic contraction had already surfaced and resulted in the closure of Spencer's steelworks.<sup>114</sup> 'Smokeless chimneys, empty workshops, silent collieries, lounging men, strained anxious-looking women, thin peaky faced children- this is Newburn, the Dole-ful community.'<sup>115</sup> The article featured an emotional plea for help by a mother, 'It's not for mysel so much-it's for the bairns...And she eyed her shabby little brood with eyes full of suffering.'<sup>116</sup>

Spennymoor was to receive a greater accolade in the national press. The *Morning Post* labelled the town as the 'Hardest Hit Area in the Country'. The correspondent continued to describe how the town was 'Defying Despair' in what was the 'Tragedy and Pride of Spennymoor.' The *Morning Post* wrote,

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<sup>112</sup> South Wales has suffered from a similar negative depiction and alongside the North East this area was also the focus of many enquiries and surveys into the impact of the Depression. See Massey, P. (November 1937) *Fact, Portrait of a Mining Town: Number 8 Investigation into a South Wales Mining Town*. Also Jennings, H. (1934) *Brynmawr: A study of a Distressed Area*, London: Allenson and Co Ltd.

<sup>113</sup> Priestley., *English Journey*, p.300.

<sup>114</sup> Newburn's prosperity was centred upon Spencer's Steelworks. Featured in the background of Irving's famous depiction of the *Blaydon Races*, the factory was Newburn's main employer occupying 2,000 people. The decline of the factory coincided with frequent appeals in local press for 'boots for bairns.' *Newcastle Chronicle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1926.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.,

The stark truth is that Spennymoor has lost its *raison d'être*, an iron foundry which has been moved to the coast. And unfortunately Spennymoor, like so many other villages and small towns in Durham and Tyneside and elsewhere in the North, was scrambled together when houses for workers were needed as fast as coal was being shot to the pithead. It is just a long, arid, ugly, straggling centipede of a village, with squat rows of brick houses for legs.<sup>117</sup>

The effect of poverty had an equally dramatic effect upon the residents. The correspondent reported,

I met a man trudging in the rain along a muddy mid-Durham road. He was small, sturdy, perhaps forty-five; his unprotected clothes were damp; he had an empty pipe in his mouth—"out of habit" he said- no tobacco in his pocket, and no prospect of affording any.<sup>118</sup>

Spennymoor was clearly lacking in aesthetic appeal, however it was the social conditions created by economic dislocation which proved the town to be fruitful territory for the establishment of a Settlement.



Figure 47  
Norman Cornish  
*Dean and Chapter Colliery*  
Oil

<sup>117</sup> *Morning Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1934.

<sup>118</sup> *Morning Post*, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1934.

The situation within Spennymoor was found by Farrell on his arrival to be “grave in the extreme”.<sup>119</sup> At this particular time, only one of Spennymoor’s seven factories was working with full employment. Of the 16 collieries surrounding the area, one third were not working at all, whilst the remainder were offering employment to less than half of their staff.<sup>120</sup> General statistics reveal approximately forty-eight and a half percent of west Durham’s insured population were out of work. This equated to 44, 699 people unemployed in this area alone.<sup>121</sup> Despite signs of a national revival later in the 1930s, economic conditions in the North East were slower to improve, as Farrell noted in the sixth Annual Report of the Settlement in 1936-37, ‘[the] prosperity boom has not made much difference to Spennymoor.’<sup>122</sup> It is surprising in fact that Cornish was able to find employment at the age of 14 in the local pit at the height of these depression years especially when considering the number of boys employed in mining dropped by fifty percent ( see table 1 for employment figures at the Dean and Chapter Colliery).<sup>123</sup> Conditions within the town did gradually improve and by the time of writing the Eighteenth Annual Report, 1948-49, Farrell noted how ‘a feeling of hope, and growing prosperity dominates our mining towns today, remarkable by contrast with what they have known in the not-so distant past.’<sup>124</sup>

In many accounts women are portrayed as the real victims of economic hardship as ‘unemployment brought leisure for men, if they chose to regard it so; it brought no rest to the wives and mothers’.<sup>125</sup> The result for women meant that ‘They must scrape and scrimp to feed and clothe the family, usually on less money than

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<sup>119</sup> Farrell, Copy of first report For File, p. 3, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>121</sup> Daysh, G.H.J. and Symonds, J.S. ‘Inter war Unemployment in West Durham, 1929-1939’ in Bulmer, M ed. (1978) *Mining and Social Change*, London: Croom Helm Ltd p.143.

<sup>122</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Sixth Annual Report, (1936-1937) p. 1, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

<sup>123</sup> Supple, *A History of the British Coal Industry*, p.457.

<sup>124</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Eighteenth Annual Report, (1948-49) p. 1 DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

<sup>125</sup> Lewis, J. (1980) *The Politics of Motherhood*, London: Croom Helm, McGill University Press, p.185. See also Mowat, C. (1955) *Britain Between The Wars, 1918-1940*, London: Methuen, p. 487. Some commentators, however, did defend the housewife. G.C.M. M’Gonigle, Medical Officer for Stockton-on-Tees was a vociferous supporter of the housewife. From his investigations he showed that women instinctively bought the right kinds of food. As consumers working class women often demonstrated adept skill in organising the family budget. There were many women who failed to run the home efficiently. However, to claim that the high levels of ill health were due to the housewife’s mismanagement is a gross generalisation. A lack of education was but one minor strand of the problem. For enquiries into dietary conditions see M’Gonigle, G.C.M and Kirby, J. (1936) *Poverty and Public Health*, London: Vicor Gollanz.

before...very often the children were well cared for and healthy. If anyone in the family went short on food and clothes, it was the mother.’<sup>126</sup> Elaine Knox, however, objects to the extent to which women have been portrayed as victims during this period pointing out that, ‘In the spate of works written in the 1930s, women serve as examples illustrating the social evils caused by male unemployment.’<sup>127</sup> It is often the case that women are depicted as domestic victims and the powerless sufferers of adverse social conditions. Knox is correct in prompting researchers to readdress the position of the working class woman. It is, however, sometimes difficult to do this particularly as the source material is weighted in favour of a negative view of women’s position. Interestingly, within regional writing women are more often depicted as the anchor within the household. They are regarded as strong characters often controlling the budget and family affairs. Priestley argued that in Durham it was women who ‘have the *sense*, the *gumption*.’<sup>128</sup>

Table 1  
Dean and Chapter Colliery.  
Employment Figures.

Year	Numbers employed.
1914	2939
1921	2418
1930	668
1940	2978
1945	2313
1947	2498
1950	2470
1955	2810
1960	2232
1961	2125
1964	1065
1966	CLOSED

Source: Durham Mining Museum.

<sup>126</sup> Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood*, p.185. Historically the female consumer displayed a strong degree of rationality and determination in defending her rights and obtaining fairly priced foods. E.P. Thompson has demonstrated the prominent role played by women in eighteenth century food riots. He explains this by arguing that women were ‘those most involved in face-to-face marketing, most sensitive to price significances, most experienced in detecting short-weight or inferior quality.’

Thompson, E.P. (1993) *Customs in Common*, London: Penguin, p.234.

<sup>127</sup> Knox. E, ‘Keep your feet still Geordie Hinnie’ in Lancaster, B. and Colls, R. ed. (1992, this edition 2005) *Geordies Roots of Regionalism*, Newcastle: Northumbria University Press p.94.

<sup>128</sup> Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 333.

As a result of unemployment, cutbacks in the household budget held a direct impact on dietary expenditure. Official advice on the subject was often unrealistic and the calculations made in relation to the cost of obtaining a nutritional diet did not relate to the reality of an unemployed families budget.<sup>129</sup> Often it was claimed that it was the housewife's mismanagement of the family budget which resulted in the provision of an inadequate diet. E.P. Cathcart was one proponent of this argument, claiming that poor nutrition 'was a result of bad housewives not lack of cash.' This was a theme explored in *Charity Main*. In one scene Johnson describes a trip to the greengrocer with housewife Mary,

The greengrocers shop into which he followed her was stocked with the new season's first fruits, high priced, but certainly within range of the family income...But Mary paid no attention to these, and plunged into the darkest recesses of the shop where only the stodgiest and solidest vegetables were displayed...

The conclusion to this scene is made plain, 'A cultivated interest in food requires the stimulus of social display and competition. But this stimulus, he [Johnson] was beginning to realise, was almost completely absent in a mining village.'<sup>130</sup>

An examination of the weekly diet of one family in Spennymoor would suggest that contrary to popular perceptions and despite the incidences of budgetary mismanagement and poor choice, a large degree of consideration went into providing a balanced diet on limited means. The family diet printed below (table 2) reveals a conservative approach to balancing the diet with home-made bread, teacakes and jams combined with careful rationing and planning of the weekly budget. The remains of the Sunday joint being used the following day and only one

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<sup>129</sup> . The B.M.A claimed that an ideal diet, which would maintain general good health could be purchased at a cost of 5s. 11d. per week for an adult male whilst an adult female would have to spend 4s. 11d. The Ministry of Health claimed that such a diet could be purchased at a price of 5s. 1 1/2d. per week. Quoted in Hannington. W, *The problem of the Distressed areas*, (First published in 1937, this edition 1976), Wakefield: EP Publishing, p.56-7. In 1936 Rowntree made his contribution to the debate hoping 'to formulate a measuring-rod, to enable us to assess the wage necessary for physical efficiency.' Rowntree argued that an average working class family (with three children) would be able to spend around 20s. 6d. on food per week. Rowntree. S.B. (ca.1919) *The Human Needs of Labour*, London: Nelson, pp.9-10. In Kuczynski's analysis, it was, however, argued that this level of budgeting provided a very poor standard of living with could not be regarded as 'desirable'. He argued that for any family living on such a budget there would be little money for any type of recreation, new clothes or furniture. Kuczynski, J. (1938) *Hunger and Work Statistical Studies*, London :Lawrence & Wishart, London, p.5.

<sup>130</sup> Benney, *Charity Main*, p. 23-24

'meatless' day a week in order to keep expenditure down. Several evening meals are recorded as being accompanied by vegetables and not just potatoes but specifically 'greens' or salad.

The responsibility placed upon women within mining communities was intensified with periods of economic hardship. Sociological investigation into the impact of unemployment formed an important part of Settlement activity. The character of women's involvement within the Settlement was intended to be socially constructive. Like many other all female groups, a philanthropic interest quickly developed. Their response to the impoverishment within Spennymoor was characteristically action based in terms of providing some degree of relief. 'The women have long thought that they would like to make some co-operative effort towards supplying some definite Town's need...' <sup>131</sup>

Table 2  
A Spennymoor family's weekly diet, 1935.

<b>Breakfast</b>	Brown and white bread. Fruit or homemade Rhubarb and Fig jam.
<b>Teas</b>	Brown and white bread. Home-made teacakes and biscuits which can be made quite cheaply.
<b>Suppers</b>	Bread and butter. Cheese if available.
Sunday	Small joint, Yorkshire pudding, potatoes, greens.
Monday	Remains of joint: cold. Fried potatoes with baked suet pudding with gravy.
Tuesday	Soup made from stock. Rice puddings or pancakes.
Wednesday	1/2lb stewing beef with potatoes and greens.
Thursday	Meatless day. Homemade chip potatoes and steamed or bread pudding. Salad.
Friday	Fish shoulders cooked and flaked made into Rissoles with tea. Bread and biscuits.

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<sup>131</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Second Annual Report (1932-1933) p. 10, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

Saturday

Shank bacon boiled with Pease pudding.

Spennymoor Settlement Investigation into  
'A Spennymoor "Dole" family's Budget and Menu'. 1935.

The Settlement invited women to express their views on a range of topical issues. The social implications of economic hardship were a focus for the 1934 BARS Annual Conference. Mrs. Vickerstaff, an early and committed member of the Spennymoor Settlement, provided evidence which attested towards a distinct shift in the attitude of men towards their wives as a direct result of the high levels of male unemployment. *The Northern Echo* reported 'instead of looking upon her as a drudge, he is willing to help her as much as he can and let her have as much freedom as possible'.<sup>132</sup>

Despite noticing a shift in the attitude of men, one report published by the Spennymoor Settlement revealed that,

In such circumstances, the strain on the mind of the woman is terrific. The minor events of ordinary life are magnified beyond all recognition by those who have no understanding of the circumstances of the unemployed. The breaking of crockery, which is almost a matter of routine under normal circumstances, becomes for the unemployed household, a real tragedy.<sup>133</sup>

The overall impact of economic depression on women was mixed. The few opportunities which occurred through social dislocation were far outweighed by the increased pressure on the working class wife making the efficient running of a household all the more difficult.

Generally it has been argued that the Depression served to deepen Durham's parochialism. 'Communities shrank in on themselves as the economic crisis slowly wore down their morale: many of the more enterprising simply took the road south, never to return. Durham's sense of separateness was confirmed: it became more

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<sup>132</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1934.

<sup>133</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement (1963) *Adult School Report on Budgets of Unemployed*, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.



inbred, sensitive to any intrusion from outside'.<sup>134</sup> It has been argued that depression worked as a unifying factor creating a sense of communal solidarity in times of economic hardship. According to Knox, 'another important factor in fostering the development of close-knit and overlapping social networks in working-class areas is the economic division of society that leaves many people vulnerable to the cycle of poverty'.<sup>135</sup> The shared and repeated experience formed a culture of poverty in which

hard times, together with the cohesion and functional interdependence resulting from the tight criss-crossing of kinship and friendship networks, generates a mutuality of feeling and purpose in working class areas; a mutuality that is the mainspring of the social institutions, ways of life and 'community spirit'.<sup>136</sup>

### **Nostalgia and the understanding of Community.**

During the interwar period, the presentation of the region was informed by a consensus of uniform poverty and industrial decline. From the numerous socio-economic investigations of this time, the North East emerged as a region which displayed an overwhelming degree of social cohesiveness in terms of cultural practice. Certainly there were several overarching themes which led observers to remark on the similarities transcending communities. Many of these consistent features were representative of the region as a whole. The distinctive class development of towns and villages within the region was for example, a direct consequence of the demands imposed by industry. However, instead of regarding the North East as a homogeneous entity it would be perhaps more realistic to understand the wider aspects of a shared collective culture which identify strongly with place and past heritage. This collective culture is something which was present in the 1930s and remains central to current regional identity.

In the 1930s shared identity was shaped by prevailing conditions of economic deprivation. White summarises this ongoing social battle to improve living and working conditions, 'Coal has exploited him, sweated him, underpaid him, swindled him, ruined his health and maimed him. Its centuries old story in Durham has been a

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<sup>134</sup> Turner, G. (1978) 'The stronghold of labour' in Bulmer, M ed. *Mining and Social Change*, London: Croom Helm Ltd. p. 124.

<sup>135</sup> Knox, E, 'Keep your feet still Geordie Hinnie' p.84.

<sup>136</sup> Knox, *Urban Social Geography*, p. 250-251.

tale of the pitmen's running battle for social justice'.<sup>137</sup> Today a sense of nostalgia is a common feature of regional culture. Depictions of the past are coloured by poignant memories of community spirit, mutual support and a sense of belonging, much of which is thought to be absent from contemporary life. The decline of mining and the removal of the pit as the nucleus of community life left a void in current day interpretations of community. As Dufferwiel notes, '...the pit, the shared workplace of the community, would give to its people a sense of common identity now gone'.<sup>138</sup>

The shared industrial experience of the region still informs a large aspect of North East regional identity. A certain degree of bitterness and regret at the decline of mining within the region remains keenly felt by places which were once reliant upon heavy industry. Sid Chaplin consistently expresses a sense of nostalgia within his writing,

I have to guard myself against waxing poetic on the theme of this great galaxy of villages each with the pit as its focal point, and each nurturing a sort of semi-tribal community which in the light of present-day urban society, seems almost a dream of paradise- a sort of pitman's *Paradiso*, safely set in the remote past. The corrective is to remember the harshness, the filth, the disease, above all the smells. At the same time, their achievements cry out for celebration. Against all the odds, they and the folk who inhabited them built up communities prepared for every contingency, little societies of great strength and resilience and full of vigour and humour.<sup>139</sup>

His love of community life was a central theme within his writing and one which he was to reiterate on numerous occasions. It was more importantly a genuine feeling by the author and was more than playing up to the friendly image of the North East community. After achieving a scholarship at Fircroft, Chaplin's personal correspondence revealed his passion for the North East and its people, 'I felt a little homesick at first. I missed the old substantial people and felt these Midland folk were so artificial'.<sup>140</sup>

To many it would seem absurd to glamorise the extreme material hardship in favour of a reminiscent view of community as it existed in the past. In contrast to

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<sup>137</sup> White, P.A. (1969) *Portrait of County Durham*, London: Hale, p. 166.

<sup>138</sup> Dufferwiel, M.(1997) *Durham a thousand years of History and Legend*, London: Mainstream, p.174.

<sup>139</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages,' p. 70.

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Chaplin to Maddison 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1930, DUL ASC GB-033-SPE.

Chaplin's nostalgic view, Abrams is in no doubt that 'when one considers the social conditions that made it possible, one is forced to the conclusion that on balance it is rather undesirable'.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, Chaplin's experience left him to conclude that 'Rough and ready it may have been-but I am still glad to warm my hands at the living memory of what it had to offer'.<sup>142</sup>

Perhaps poverty was an essential element in forging a sense of community. Mark Benney, author of *Charity Main* was in no doubt that the absence of pretentious urban living meant that 'miners made their demands on life as a community, not as individuals'.<sup>143</sup> A similar sentiment was echoed by Marrs, 'People talk about the good old days, but the only good thing about them was that people rallied round to help. I think it was because everyone was in the same boat-Poor'.<sup>144</sup> Of course for those who just observed Durham mining villages it was not surprising to learn that they found little romance and 'just the bare bones of existence'.<sup>145</sup>

Perceptions of community life in the past are influenced disproportionately by a small number of studies relating to working class communities. It has been argued that the material deprivation experienced by families is overlooked in favour of sentimental accounts which stress the emotional ties within communities. Like Chaplin's writing, Cornish's art contributes significantly as a study on sentiment. Michael Chaplin, son of Sid Chaplin and also a writer argues that Cornish's work is more than 'an exercise in off-the-peg nostalgia'.<sup>146</sup> He argues,

There may be love in Norman's pictures, but there's often revulsion too. For every sunny morning with carts and children playing, there is a dark evening with a muddy road stretching to nowhere. Loneliness hangs on the sloping shoulders of its solitary figures, and there is menace in the jagged fencing and tilting telegraph poles. These are the images that haunt my imagination, for of course the figures are my father and grandfathers, and maybe yours too.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Abrams, P. in Bulmer, M. (1986) *Neighbours: The work of Philip Abrams*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 341.

<sup>142</sup> Chaplin, 'Durham Mining Villages,' p. 82.

<sup>143</sup> Benney, *Charity Main* p. 24.

<sup>144</sup> Marrs, H. (1993) *The Dying Breed Coal Mining History and memories of North West Durham*, Durham: County Durham Books, p.42.

<sup>145</sup> Sharp, *Derelict Area*, p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> Chaplin, M. (1999) Introduction to *Cornish and Spennymoor*, Newcastle: University Gallery.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.,

Despite Michael Chaplin's attempt to highlight the less appealing side of mining life within Cornish's work, the author is also guilty of indulging in a more sentimental interpretation of the work. Describing an image similar to *Low Spennymoor* (figure 48), he writes,

A back lane, a windy Monday, serried ranks of washing blowing on lines, some children playing. You look at this picture, with its economy and movement, and instinctively know what's going to happen next: the muddy ball will soon strike a sheet, and a woman in an apron will come running: either that, or the rag and bone man will appear, calling from his cart, and *all* the women will come running, to take the washing in or prop it high over the horse's head.<sup>148</sup>

This image he describes as 'quintessential Cornish'. It appears that there may be more of the 'off- the- peg nostalgia' in Cornish's work than Michael Chaplin would willingly acknowledge.



Figure 48  
Norman Cornish  
*Low Spennymoor*  
Watercolour and pen

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.,

Just as community provided a central theme of analysis for sociologists and reporters during the depression years, so today the concept is once again the focus of much commentary. The retrospective fascination with past communities has often led to the romanticising of certain aspects of communal life and the neglect of poor living conditions and abject poverty. By selecting certain aspects of past community life as desirable it is clear that the material aspects are always minimal in contrast to the human contacts and relationships that existed.

Bauman argues our modern day fascination with community is purely centred upon modern day insecurities.<sup>149</sup> Certainly it would appear that the absence of traditional community life in current society has promoted almost a cult of community centred upon nostalgic accounts of the past. Hobsbawm writing in the *New Left Review* commented 'never has the word "community" [been] used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life'.<sup>150</sup> Friedman has noted the outcome of this indiscriminate use of community, 'one thing that is not happening is that boundaries are disappearing. Rather, they seem to be erected on every new street corner of every declining neighbourhood of our world'.<sup>151</sup>

In 1999, Jack Young put forward the claim that 'Just as community collapses identity is invented'.<sup>152</sup> A different situation can be found within the North East. The popularity of community as a dimension within the region's identity is not a recent creation. It is a carefully constructed and well established analytical tool. Decades of outside representation of North East mining communities as separate entities have perhaps permeated and reinforced a notion of distinctiveness within popular regional consciousness. The level of interest in the work of Cornish by a regional market is answered in part by the retrospective development of past community life and the representation of regional distinctiveness. Cornish's depiction of the North East meets the current demand for nostalgic interpretations of past community life. The popularity of his work can be understood by the accepted desire to keep a traditional

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<sup>149</sup> Bauman, *Community*, p. 144.

<sup>150</sup> Hobsbawm, E.P. (1996), 'The Cult of Identity Politics', *New Left Review*, 217, p. 40.

<sup>151</sup> Friedman, J. (1999) 'The hybridization of roots and the abhorrence of the bush', in Featherstone, M. and Lash, S. eds. *Spaces of Culture*, London: Sage, p. 241.

<sup>152</sup> Young, J. (1999) *The Exclusive Society*, London: Sage, p. 164.

sense of community alive within current regional identity. Therefore it would be more appropriate to argue that community remains a consistent theme within regional identity but has more recently been rejuvenated in conjunction with nostalgic perceptions of the past.

The conclusions drawn here suggest that modern day perceptions of community life and regional identity are informed by nostalgic interpretations of the past which have permeated into current Northern culture. Cornish's modern popularity is partly attributable to this nostalgia. However it is ironic that through the constant reiteration of themes relating to mining community life, Cornish ensures his own popularity. His work continuously incites regular debate and discussion within the popular media. As his work reaches an ever widening audience such nostalgic reminiscences increasingly become ingrained in the cultural history of the region.

## **Conclusion.**

The pit village culture symbolised more than a simple set of categorisable structures. It was symbolised by an entire set of localised superstitions and traditions, which in total contributed to an internal logic. A set of organisational structures and beliefs internally organised, served to regulate the homogeneity of the community.<sup>153</sup>

This chapter has examined the existence of homogeneity within popular perceptions of mining communities and the extent to which this has shaped current cultural discourse surrounding the region's sense of identity. Both at earlier periods such as the 1930s and present day, the representation of North East communities has not always been consistent with the reality of the situation. The imposition of labels such as 'peculiar' or 'different' only reinforced an internal view that the region's communities were in some way separated from the outside. Commentators found a cultural divide between the region and the rest of the country and this in turn has only added an internal logic which in terms of identity confirms the distinctiveness of the North East and reinforces the current trend in nostalgia.

Many accounts would even question the existence of community in the first place and warn against the romanticising of a concept which is nothing more than a retrospective construction. In this instance it is maintained that nostalgic visions of

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<sup>153</sup> Pattison, *Restructuring Culture*, p. 66

community do not deter from its value as a form of social analysis but only assist in deciphering the multitude of meanings which contribute to our understanding of identity. In a regional sense, community as a social descriptor of the North East in the twentieth century is a fundamental aspect of understanding cultural identity.

The unique industrial developments insured distinct class composition and sociological structure of the region which as Pattison argues left an internal logic and understanding regarding the nature of community. This has transcended the pit village to become ingrained within regional culture. The shared common experiences which helped to create the foundations of mining communities have been replaced by a mutual understanding of how the region has developed. It is a past history which is very much present within the region's identity. It is interesting to note how North East culture manages to blend a modern image of cultural progressiveness with traditional working class depictions of regional life.

The efforts to promote regional enlightenment and attract new industry have formed an integral part of the region's identity since the onset of industrial decline. Even during the years of depression, attempts were made to re-brand the region as one of advancement instead of decline. However the reluctance to erase the industrial past completely is not altogether a negative situation but one which demonstrates a desirable cultural balance. The bitterness at the final contraction of mining which characterised the 1980s has been replaced at the beginning of this century with a nostalgic vision of a shared past. What is perhaps most interesting is the extent to which Cornish's continuing presence within the regional media acts as a catalyst in driving the recurrent appeal towards this strand of the region's past.

# Chapter three

## The Pitman's Academy.





## The Pitman's Academy.

Seven years ago a young man stood in the gas-lit main street of a small Durham township. He was a stranger, and, as it seemed to him then, in a hostile land. About him were 16,000 people, all of whom had grown up in the shadow of pit-head gear, and colliery and steel foundry dumps. But the collieries were idle, or working short time and the foundry had gone...The township was but one little part of the wreckage left on the verge of civilisation's shore by the receding tide of economic prosperity. Unemployment, with the resulting privation and despair, hung over the town like a cloud.<sup>1</sup>

William Farrell's arrival in the town of Spennymoor, County Durham in 1931 heralded the beginning of an educational settlement which would completely alter perceptions of the area and the attitudes of its inhabitants. The particular strand of the Spennymoor Settlement's work known popularly as the 'The Pitman's Academy' provides the main focus of this third chapter. It will be necessary to consider the wider debate which characterised adult education as well as considering how art was used to raise the cultural outlook of the working classes. The Council for the Encouragement of Music and Art (CEMA) established in 1940 is central within this process. The position of Farrell was of particular interest to the research of Natasha Vall. This chapter will reassess the influence of the warden, arguing that his lengthy stay in Spennymoor extended beyond his own bohemian quest for self-identity into a role of actively promoting the commercial careers of his young students.

## The Spennymoor Settlement

In Farrell's draft report for the Pilgrim Trust, 1931, he noted Spennymoor's suitability for the establishment of a settlement 'There is rich and untilled soil here waiting for the seeds of general culture. Who shall turn the first sod?'<sup>2</sup> The preceding chapter demonstrated the characteristics of the town which would undoubtedly have confirmed Spennymoor as the ideal location for educational work. As a traditional mining community, the Depression had had a devastating effect on both the social and economic vitality of the town.

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<sup>1</sup> Produced by the Joint Settlements Council on behalf of the Spennymoor Settlement for the extension of the work and premises of the Settlement, (June 1938) 'The First seven Years at the Spennymoor Settlement. A Historical Sketch and an Appeal.' DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>2</sup> *Draft Report* May/ June 1931, p.4 DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

Aesthetically, Farrell regarded Spennymoor as culturally impoverished and more importantly in his opinion, community life was virtually non-existent. Educational provision in the town was also limited with only three Workers Educational Association groups which met in working men's clubs. Farrell regarded the unemployed miners as generally inert, 'perhaps because there is little to do and nowhere for them to go, not even a public library with a newspaper'. <sup>3</sup>

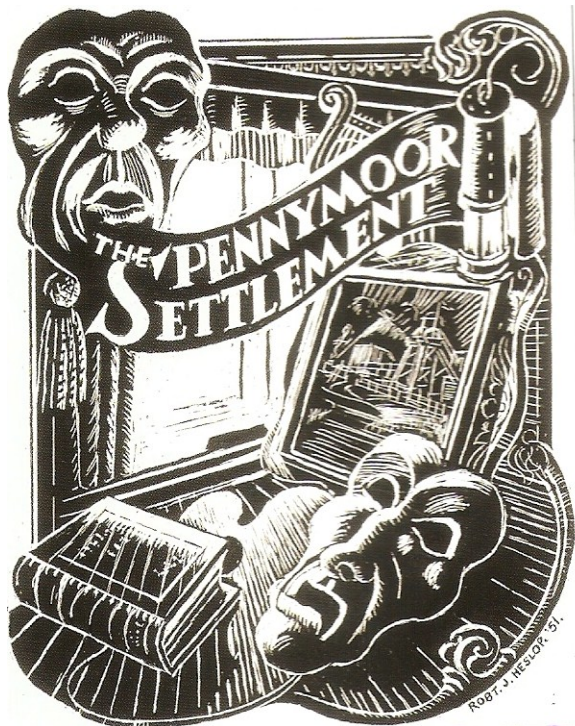


Figure 49  
Robert Heslop  
*Everyman Logo*  
Spennymoor Settlement  
Scraperboard

Interwar unemployment had reinvigorated the educational debate and the role of educational settlements found itself to be of pivotal importance. Whilst drawing heavily on the principles of residential settlements which had been established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, non-residential educational settlements continued to provide a liberal, cultural education whilst directly combating the debilitating impact of mass unemployment. The pioneering work of the Barnetts in

<sup>3</sup> Farrell, W. (1931) Copy of first report For File, 28<sup>th</sup> April, p. 5-9, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

the impoverished East London parish of St. Jude's led to the establishment of the Toynbee Hall Settlement in 1884. Often regarded as a conventional patronising Victorian response to the poverty created by rapid industrialisation, the Settlement invited the most privileged to live in poverty and experience firsthand the squalid conditions of urban life. It was a move which differentiated the Settlement from previous philanthropic activity and heavily influenced the nature of both charity work and educational reform. Commissioned by the British Association of Residential Settlements with funding from the Pilgrim Trust, the Spennymoor Settlement was established with the cultural ideals of Toynbee Hall at its core. Farrell himself had spent time at Toynbee Hall and fully embraced its enlightened cultural approach

The debate regarding education was one which thrived during the interwar Depression years. Should working class adults be given further education, to what purpose would that education be put and what if anything should they be taught? The correct use of leisure time had been an argument which predated the economic crisis of the 1930s. W.G. Fretton expressed his views on the appropriate use of leisure in 1870,

There is, perhaps, no subject of deeper importance to our working population than that which involves the consideration of the best means of employing leisure hours; for there is nothing more mischievous in its effect than the possession of spare time, with no object in view, to occupy at least some portion of it. <sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, Fretton wanted working men to emancipate themselves from the snares of indulging in 'profitless leisure.' He was, however, keen to point out the social nature of the working man arguing that 'his greatest enjoyments are those which spring from association; he loses half the delight he would experience in sharing his pleasure with others, by shutting himself up in his shell, oblivious of everyone but himself.' <sup>5</sup> The Settlement environment answered the demand for social interaction within leisure by offering a supportive group environment.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Truly great men, as their biographies teach us, never wantonly wasted their spare hours...if every son of toil...dedicate at least some of his hours of ease to such good purpose, that even his recreations shall bear the impress of an intelligent mind, and bring with them the reward of a substantial recompense.' Fretton, W.G. (1870) *The Artisan, His Recreation and Hobbies*, in *The Buildings of Coventry*, (publisher details unknown) p. 1, 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

It has been widely noted that the most constant feature of British education is its continued division according to class. 'For each class of society' claimed Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth in 1862, 'there is an appropriate education.'<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century the growth of philanthropic and humanitarian attitudes raised the status of working class education as a desirable social factor. Education in this period however, was as Harrison makes clear chiefly 'designed to strengthen the social fabric, rather than provide cultural or emotional enrichment for the individual.'<sup>7</sup>

Before the development of voluntary bodies, educational needs were catered for by specific class orientated institutes. The two most prominent of these were the Literary and Philosophical Societies and the Mining Institutes. The role of the 'Lit and Phil' as an intellectual club for the professional classes continued for most of the nineteenth century allowing such institutes to remain powerful forces in adult education within provincial towns.<sup>8</sup>

Neil Smelser confirms that class-based education was equally as prominent during the twentieth century, arguing that 'education was stratified by class in the extreme; it was organised in the first instance by the strata-within-community rather than community as such; and the upper classes explicitly and self-consciously organised education for the combined control and presumed benefit of the lower

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<sup>6</sup> Kay-Shuttleworth, J. (1862) *Four Periods of Public Education*, London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, , p. 322.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, J.F.C. (1961) *Learning and Living 1790-1960*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> The geological attributes of the North East ensured the region's industrial supremacy. However, financial exploitation of these natural features could not have occurred without the intellectual climate required to support such intense economic activity. As has often been the case within the region, Newcastle provided the central focus for regional entrepreneurship. It was at Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society that Joseph Swan first demonstrated his electric light bulb. The same location provided the debut for George Stephenson's safety lamp. Unquestionably, industrial pioneers and innovation promoted the region's early economic pre-eminence and Newcastle's Lit and Phil was at the heart of much of this activity. In Newcastle, the Lit and Phil's neighbouring building is Neville Hall, the location of the Mining institute. Such establishments retained a more middle class character but Chadwick argues that they still provided a major form of working class education in the early nineteenth century through exhibitions of machinery and working models. Chadwick, A. (1983) 'Practical Aids to Nineteenth Century Self-Help-The Museums: Private Collections into Public Institution's', in Stephens M.D. and Roderick, G.W. *Samuel Smiles and Nineteenth Century Self-help in Education*, Vol. I, Nottingham: University of Nottingham, Department of Adult Education p. 16-17.

classes.’<sup>9</sup> Class-orientated education was also a significant feature of the twentieth century. This chapter will proceed to demonstrate that middle class cultural control was a key aspect of interwar educational thought and one which characterised the aims and method of Settlement activity.

Citizenship, self-improvement, political advancement and aesthetic taste were all arguments in favour of giving the working classes increased educational opportunities. For example, Nicholson, writing in 1937, recognised adult education in terms of providing freedom in the modern state, ‘for thousands of men and women it provides a ‘way of salvation,’ personal and social, which they have failed to find in the organised church.’<sup>10</sup> Rowntree echoed this sentiment explaining that ‘In the churches of our land there is a feeling of disappointment and bewilderment.’<sup>11</sup> An enlightened approach towards adult education was viewed as a viable alternative to the shortfalls of organised religion.

Middle class cultivators were also concerned with the growing technical advancement which characterised the development of industry during this period, ‘We live in a mechanical age, in an age of mass production, and the individual is in danger of being absorbed and dominated by the machine. Many a man is engaged in monotonous and wearisome labour without joy or hope. The best antidote is the right employment of leisure.’<sup>12</sup> Jessup however, saw a bigger threat in technological specialisation arguing that the specialist’s ignorance of wider events led to a ‘cultural barbarism’,

The technological specialist is a phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, as he himself well knows, he has become indispensable to the perpetuation of the material conditions which we have come to accept as modern civilization. He is the new barbarian, the man who “knows” very well his own corner of the universe but is radically ignorant of all the rest...he is a person who is ignorant, not in the fashion of the ignorant man, but with all the petulance of one who is

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<sup>9</sup> Smelser, N. (1991) *Social Paralysis and Social Change British Working Class Education in the nineteenth century*, California: University of California Press, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholson, J.H. ‘Why Adult education?’ in *Bulletin of the World Association of Adult Education*, No. X, Series 2, 1937, p. 9, 13.

<sup>11</sup> A.S. Rowntree’s introduction to Gilman, F. J. (1916) *The Workers and Education, A record of some present day experiments*, London: George Allen and Unwin p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> BIAE, (1945) *Adult Education After the War, A report of an inquiry made for the British Institute of Adult Education*, London : Oxford University Press, p. vii.

learned in his own special line...By specialising him, civilisation has made him hermetic and self-satisfied within his limitations; but this very inner feeling of dominance and worth will induce him to predominate outside his speciality.<sup>13</sup>

As Settlements found their niche in the development of social work, they were often seen acting as advocates on a variety of welfare issues, education, housing and entitlements. Toynbee Hall has been widely recognised for its social and welfare work influencing amongst others William Beveridge and Clement Attlee. In America, the settlement movement took an equally active role in welfare issues, campaigning during the New Deal, and carrying out major studies on prohibition and employment.<sup>14</sup> The social dimension of Settlement activity remained just as important in interwar Britain. Participating in investigations such as those which formed the content of the Tyneside Papers the Tyneside Council of Social Service aimed to draw attention to housing and health issues. The Newcastle Upon Tyne Housing Trust was formed with the direct support of the Council. In Spennymoor, social investigation was to remain a major facet of Settlement work.

The role of settlement activity took on a regional dimension during the interwar years as educational activity began to focus upon the Special Areas. In the North East of England and in Wales, the towns which were experiencing the greatest difficulties were those which had specialised in the traditional heavy industries such as coal mining. However these areas in turn proved often to be the most resistant to cultural cultivation. The lack of educational tradition within mining districts is longstanding. As early as 1850, the detrimental impact on young boys' education was noted in North East colliery villages,

...The children are taken at such a young age to the pit, that it is not uncommon to find in the colliery schools not a single boy of the age required for the apprenticeship; or, if there be any, they are, in general, unintelligent lads, who attend school very irregularly, and are occupied during a part of the year in the agricultural operations of the district.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jessup, F. (1949) 'Adult Education and the Arts', in *Adult Education*, March XXI No. 3, p.119.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, C. (1995) *Strength in Community (1914-1970) an introduction to the history and impact of the international settlement movement*, IFS Occasional Paper (Part Two) p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1850, 43, pp 778-9 quoted in N. Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change*, p.301.

In the twentieth century, the same constraints of pit life were noted as factors which prevented adults from attending voluntary educational programmes. Poor industrial and social conditions formed 'almost insuperable obstacles' to adult education which 'prevent individual workers from realising fully their powers and capacities.'<sup>16</sup> Shift patterns and night work combined with the physical exertion of mining were obstacles to the acquisition of education. The 1918 *Interim Report of the Committee on Adult Education* summarised evidence from one Durham Miner who had described in detail the complications of pursuing adult classes 'For those who are willing to attend classes difficulties are awaiting in the shape of inconvenient shifts...if the student is a coal hewer he can attend two weeks out of three; the third week he has to be at work during class hours...For the rest of the miners anything like regular attendance of evening classes is practically impossible.'<sup>17</sup>

Educationalists recognised the difficulties in pursuing education for the working classes and alongside the limitations imposed by shift work, Mansbridge highlighted how students had no place to study at home, and most interestingly experienced hostility from family and employers.<sup>18</sup> Clearly the mistrust of education which Farrell encountered was manifest throughout the community. Resistance towards adult education often led people to reject participation in Settlement activity. Marks hoped that 'Irrational prejudices of all sorts can be broken down in the common life of the centre. It is likely that many people are kept from joining activities which they would in fact enjoy, by feelings of inferiority or by the belief that those groups consist of high-brow or 'queer' people.'<sup>19</sup> Sketching Club members were described as 'cissies' by Spennymoor residents who were unable to understand the motivation of group members. Farrell remarks upon the difficulty for community members to understand the group. However, 'slowly the sight of a grown man sitting drawing in a public place, when he might have been at a football match, grew less and less queer in the eyes of Spennymoor'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Interim Report of the Committee on Adult Education Industrial and Social Conditions in relation to Adult Education*, (1918) cd. 9107, London: HMSO, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>18</sup> Mansbridge, A. (1920) *An Adventure in Working-Class Education Being the Story of the Workers' Educational Association*, London: Longmans, Green and co., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Marks, H. (1949), *Community Association and Adult Education*, Community Association Booklet No. 3, Bristol p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> *London Calling*, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945

The Interim Report argued that unemployment was a factor which dissuaded attendance at evening classes and settlements, arguing that those out of work were too occupied with the search for employment.<sup>21</sup> This perhaps altered in the 1930s when people lost hope of finding alternative sources of employment and became resigned to the fact that they were unlikely to find work. It was at this point that Settlements became an attractive opportunity for the unemployed.

Accounts of mining communities reveal a 'wistful respect for the 'scholard' as well as the belief that if miners had been better educated they might have been more apt in fighting social injustices and political battles.<sup>22</sup> For many, there was the desire to escape from the mine and education was the means through which this could be achieved. Dufferwiel notes in the

'heyday of the coalfield it was a proud and accepted tradition that a son would eventually follow his father down the pit. However, there were also those miners who wished the opposite that sons of theirs would break away, seek other employment, and find opportunities they never had'.<sup>23</sup>

The novelist, Sid Chaplin uses the theme of escape regularly in his writing, as he regards the pit as both magnetic as well as repulsive. The main character, Christopher Jack in *The Thin Seam*, finally makes his escape from the pit only to find its compelling draw pull him back; he finds himself almost duty bound to return.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of latent educational aspirations, it was widely upheld that the chief characteristics of the working class student were prejudice and diffidence.<sup>25</sup> Mining communities were also highlighted as particularly impervious to the desires of middle class reformers. This appears to have been the case in Spennymoor; Farrell had to live in the town for a year in order to 'break down the opposition of distrust'.<sup>26</sup> *The Times* describes apathy within Spennymoor that 'will not breed revolution but would make it difficult to adjust to circumstances'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Interim Report*, (1918) cd. 9107, HMSO, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> Benney, *Charity Main*, p. 102-103.

<sup>23</sup> Dufferwiel, *Durham*, p.175.

<sup>24</sup> Chaplin, *The Thin Seam*.

<sup>25</sup> Peers, R. ed. (1934) *Adult Education in Practice*, London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Spennymoor Settlement, First Annual Report, (1931-1932) DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 2 February, 1933.



Robert Peers, whose educational credentials were confirmed by his extensive efforts in the mining communities of Nottingham where he was head of the new Department of Extra-Mural Adult Education, wrote extensively on the difficulties of educating mining communities.<sup>28</sup> The adult tutor not only had to contend with the fact that students are of a comparatively late age but that their 'curiosity and interest [is] stimulated by the hard facts of experience and by a consciousness of their own intellectual deficiencies.'<sup>29</sup> Peers regarded educational groups in which all members follow the same occupation as the most difficult to educate highlighting in particular miners. He argues that in this case 'discussion tends to get into ruts, and the class loses the advantage of being able to draw upon a wide variety of experience.'<sup>30</sup> In order to surmount these barriers, Peers argues the success of the tutor rests on his understanding of their difficulties and his ability to 'utilise their experience, and even their prejudices, in the attainment of wider knowledge.'<sup>31</sup> Mary Pumphrey, a student at Fircroft College, described the ability of the tutors to find common ground with their students, 'It is perhaps surprising how soon some of them who had neither experienced poverty nor unemployment themselves understood the men who came from both and made friends with them. Luckily most tutors played football.'<sup>32</sup>

'There is no district in England more forlornly destitute of socially redemptive agencies, and none in which the dolorous conditions under which social life proceeds make social agencies more requisite.'<sup>33</sup> The North East with its chronic unemployment and associated social deprivation provided huge scope in terms of widespread educational opportunities. In fact the region played host to numerous educational experiments. Alongside Ashington and Spennymoor, Settlements existed in Gateshead, Seaham and Lemington. A brief overview of settlement work within the region would suggest that whilst contact was maintained between

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<sup>28</sup> For a full account of the development of adult education in Nottingham under the supervision of Peers see Peers, *The Nottingham Experiment in Adult Education 1920-1935*, and Mee, G. (1984) *Miners, Adult Education and Community service 1920-1984*, University of Nottingham: Reliance Press, pp.8-12.

<sup>29</sup> Peers, R. (1934) *Adult Education in Practice*, (Prepared under the auspices of the Association of Tutors in Adult Education), London: Macmillan, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70-71.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Pumphrey, M.E. (1952) *Recollections of Fircroft*, Birmingham: Fircroft College Trust, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *The Pilgrim Trust Second Annual Report*, 1932, p.15, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

settlements, educational work varied greatly between localities depending upon various circumstances. This was generally the case within adult education, as E.M. Batten makes clear, 'with regard to the ability of a settlement to provide a formal educational programme of classes, it would appear to depend, to some extent, on the situation of the settlement and the intention of the settlement to provide for its immediate neighbours or for a wider group.'<sup>34</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement logo (figure 49 *Everyman Logo*) designed by sketching club member Robert Heslop provides a strong indication of the activities which dominated the programme. The logo includes a painting, a book and a thespian mask (table 3 Weekly Programme of Events).

The interests of the warden and their educational leanings often dictated the nature of the settlements outlook. In Lemington, the settlement had its own microscope, 6' telescope and ambitions to have its own observatory. The scope of the amenities provided at Lemington led many observers to note how even the more established settlements would have struggled to produce a programme and general equipment as impressive and comprehensive as Lemington could claim.<sup>35</sup>

Considering the extent of poverty within areas of Tyneside and Durham, the settlements had to provide tangible evidence of supporting the community. Cobbling, furniture making, 'make do and mend' were all ways in which the settlements aimed to relieve the material hardship of poverty. Cornish describes how leather and nails for the cobbling of shoes acted as the 'fisherman's hook' which drew people into the settlement environment.<sup>36</sup> Similarly events in Hebburn caught the attention of Priestley when he visited the town. With the support of the Tyneside Council of Social Service, unemployed men were able to purchase and restore a fishing boat. Describing the scene Priestley wrote,

...one boat is not idle on that river. That is the one we looked at now, as she creaked at her moorings. She was an old ship's boat and as she was in poor shape, she was bought for the social centre for four pounds. The men themselves patched her up.

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<sup>34</sup> Batten, E.M. (1939) *An Educational Policy*, BARS, Autumn p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> W. Arnold Hall, (1985), *The Adult School Movement in the Twentieth Century*, University of Nottingham, p. 142-145.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, January, 2005.

She carries a sail and ten men usually go out in her, working three lines. The fish they bring back...is not sold but distributed among the unemployed men's families.

The men named the boat the *Venture*, yet as Priestley bitterly remarked 'This Venture may be their pride, but it is our shame.'<sup>37</sup>

The extent of material deprivation was a factor which meant that Settlement activity turned increasingly to the relief of poverty at the expense of cultural improvement. This was a particular feature of interwar Settlement activity. In Trearlaw in the Rhondda, the Maes-yr-Haf Settlement was established in 1927. As well as providing educational activities, the Settlement was also forced to provide a soup kitchen in the hope of alleviating the extreme deprivation found within this mining area. It was believed that settlements located in the government designated Special Areas were able to attract more funding than earlier settlements both from grant-making agencies such as the Pilgrim Trust and via State involvement in depressed regions. In Spennymoor the financial situation of the Settlement would remain precarious and on its initiation was already regarded as a threat to the existing educational provisions of the Local Education Authority.<sup>38</sup>

After convincing his patrons of the suitability of Spennymoor, Farrell acquired the premises of a disused shop in King Street.<sup>39</sup> The Settlement was to encourage

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<sup>37</sup> Priestley, *English Journey*, p.241. Lectures were common features of the Council's programme. Topics ranged from the practical such as 'Home keeping under pressure' or 'Productive use of Leisure' to those of a more historical content such as 'The Industrial Revolution and the 'Psychology of the workers.' The men were also encouraged to participate in football, chess, camping and rambling. The male voice choir even won the Bell Trophy in the North of England Musical Tournament. Short breaks were also included as part of the provisions made by the Council. It was described how 'All the men' who went camping in Sparty Lea, Allenheads 'returned home fitter in body and stimulated in mind. Northumberland and Tyneside Council of Social Service, Newcastle Unemployed and Welfare Committee, *Fourth Report of the Tyneside Council of Social Service*, p.11. NCL, Local Studies Collection.

<sup>38</sup> Farrell noted in his draft report how the LEA 'will not wish a voluntary agency to compete' in the provision of evening classes. Farrell, Copy of First Report for File, 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1931, p. 11, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>39</sup> The premises of the Settlement were according to Cornish far from palatial. Vall contrasts the modesty of premises in Spennymoor with the more opulent settings of Bensham and Seaham, Vall, 'Cultural Improvers,' p. 170. In Contrast with earlier activities in the County, the disused shop was a marked improvement. NASU ratified the appointment of Charles Bristow to undertake extension work in County Durham. A former student at Fircroft, Bristow wrote a collection of articles for the journal *One and All* which revealed the nature of adult education within the County. Bristow described how lectures often took place in a soft drinks bar and that the pupils were often so primitively educated that 'words may cause difficulty and explanation is called for.' Unlike educational developments at Spennymoor, the outbreak of war cut short Bristow's work in the county. Likewise in Crook, the lack of

art, literary and musical activities. Providing child care facilities, a citizen's advice bureau and housing the local branch of the County Library, the activity of the settlement encompassed the educational, recreational and welfare needs of the town. Its ethos was dictated by an enlightened social policy which sought 'to encourage tolerant neighbourliness and voluntary social service, that it gives to its members opportunities for increasing their knowledge, widening their interests and cultivating their creative powers in a friendly atmosphere.'<sup>40</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement was to be 'A communal meeting place for men and women where all questions of human interest are discussed and investigated without reference to class, creed or party.'<sup>41</sup>

The variety of activity at the Settlement was naturally dictated by Farrell's own artistic and dramatic leanings. However, in the tolerant attitude of the Settlement, members were invited to suggest topics that might provide wider interest in the community.<sup>42</sup> The Settlement's weekly programme reflected both the interests of the warden, the pragmatic needs of the community and the cultural interests of the working classes.

Despite middle class aspirations to mould the attitudes and cultural taste of the working class it would seem clear that a degree of resistance occurred. Practical concerns were certainly more of a priority for the residents of Spennymoor. Vall has noted how the town's residents were 'exercising perspicacity in their response to overt cultural reform,' and whilst the childcare facilities were proving to be in great demand academic courses excited little response (table 4 Enrolment Figures).<sup>43</sup> The use of the Settlement's premises as a meeting place for Spennymoor's unemployed also shows the disparity between educationalists and the working class. This in turn led Farrell to abandon the open house policy in favour of a membership scheme based upon an annual subscription. Farrell noted, '... Last winter's experiences with

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premises forced the male voice choir to use the open fields for rehearsals. 'Art for the People: a British Institute Experiment' in *Adult Education*, No.3, Vol. VII, April 1935, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Syllabus 1934-1935 p. 3, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> The Constitution of the Settlement states, 'In consultation with the warden to suggest and promote such schemes as will further the general and particular work of the Settlement.' The Spennymoor Settlement Members' Association Constitution p. 1, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>43</sup> Vall, 'Cultural Improvers', p. 170.

several hundreds of men most of whom had no desire to attempt creative voluntary work or attend voluntary educational groups proved that the “Free House” policy was a mistake’.<sup>44</sup> Through the imposition of subscription fees Farrell, it would seem, was reminded of the original hopes he had expressed in his draft report where he stated, ‘...the proposal is not that the settlements should do work for Spennymoor, but that Spennymoor should be helped to do work for itself’.<sup>45</sup>

Table 3  
Weekly programme of Events 1932.  
The Spennymoor Settlement Report .

<b>Day</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Monday	Cobbling Library Current Events Group Women’s Craft Group
Tuesday	Cobbling Drama Rehearsals Musical Society ***
Wednesday	Cobbling Settlement Parliament Elementary Economics ***
Thursday	Cobbling Drama Rehearsals WEA one year class in “ Drama and the Arts of the Theatre”
Friday	Cobbling Drama Rehearsals Women’s Craft Group Library
Saturday	Play Centre Sketching Club

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<sup>44</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Report p.11, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>45</sup> Farrell, Copy of First Report for File, 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1931, p.11, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

## Enquirers Club \*\*\*

Sunday

Closed. Warden is rehearsing the production of a play for the Middlesbrough Settlement.

\*\*\* New This Term

The disparity between middle class attitudes towards working class education and working class aims is apparent. Middle class improvers regarded education as a means of cultivating the labouring classes into respectability and responsible citizenship, often this stood in contrast to the political and social purposes of the working classes who understood education as a means to an end. Nicholson noted this variance in attitude arguing that working class educational desires were most characteristic because of the need to decipher a relationship between learning and living, 'There is a sense of urgency which is absent from most middle-class groups- for middle-class people are in the main tolerably content with the society of which they are reputed to be 'the backbone.'<sup>46</sup>

Table 4  
Enrolment Figures

Group	Number of People Enrolled
Children's Play Centre	110
Local Government Study	78
Play reading and Dramatic Study	43
Current Events	41
Women's needlework	35
Cobblers Working Group	30
Male voice choir	29
Sketching	20
Elementary Psychology	20

Source Spennymoor Settlement First Report 1931-32

As part of the same research into dietary behaviour, the Spennymoor Settlement also examined the budget of a family living on the dole. Included in the

<sup>46</sup> Nicholson, 'Why Adult education?' p.12.

weekly budget, were the expected costs of rent, fuel and provisions. In terms of leisure the family set aside money for betting, cigarettes, clubs and the cinema. Jessop recognised that adult education and the role of the arts was receiving a considerable challenge from alternative leisure pursuits,

Pelvis Bay, the super cinema, the sloppy song, the puerile film, are the prevailing art forms-or un-art forms-of the middle of the twentieth century. Between the creative artists and the masses, who are now the tune-callers, is a lack of sympathy which leads, on one part, to a cultural barbarism, and on the other, to an unhealthy esotericism.<sup>47</sup>

A considerable proportion of money was paid out in contributions to various groups such as the Friendly Society and the Burial Club. It is perhaps understandable that families with a strict budget preferred to pay into clubs which would provide practical returns as opposed to abstract cultural improvement with little in the way of tangible return. Criticism was levied upon working class recipients of adult education for failing to contribute financially, B.S. Gott secretary to the Middlesex Education Committee, commented,

In connection with the appeal for increased expenditure it should not be forgotten that adults are often in receipt of good wages and spend large sums on their own personal amusements. The success of the cinema, the greyhound track, the football match, and the theatre, the crowded excursion trains at Bank Holiday and other times, tend to show that thousands of the so-called "working classes" have really a considerable surplus to devote to more or less frivolous if harmless recreations, and it is possible to believe that, by a little sacrifice, they could make a reasonable contribution towards their own educational advancement.<sup>48</sup>

The response to the establishment of the Settlement in Spennymoor by both authorities and residents was mixed. As previously noted the LEA demonstrated concern regarding the Settlement's perceived encroachment in the educational field. Certainly the physical presence of the Farrells aroused interest as the following quote makes plain.

It is difficult to conceive anything more drear than the long street of Spennymoor, 60 to 70 per cent of the population are unemployed and hang around all day without interest and without hope. To break through this apathy is the warden's task. Mr and

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<sup>47</sup> F. Jessup, 'Adult Education and the Arts,' p.119.

<sup>48</sup> 'The Tutors' Enquiry Report, The Tutor on Adult Education' in *The Tutors' Bulletin*, No.25, September, 1928, p. 15.

Mrs W.G. Farrell began by startling their Spennymoor neighbours by the bright colours in which they painted their flat.<sup>49</sup>

Residents of Spennymoor displayed both distrust, apathy and confusion with regard to the Settlement's purpose and aims within the town. By the time of the Second Annual Report, Farrell appeared rather downbeat at the length of time it was taking for the Settlement to become fully ingratiated within the community, 'The settlement itself is settling down, the slowness of the subsidence is some measure of the obstinacy of the ground'.<sup>50</sup>

It would not seem surprising that the Settlement was slow to have a positive impact on the residents when it appeared that many failed to understand the basic concepts of the movement. Marks noted how in areas 'where conditions of life have tended to sap the will as well as the capacity to undertake social responsibility, [settlements] can only make slow progress against frequent disappointments and cries of 'What's the warden for?''<sup>51</sup> Certainly this was the case in Spennymoor where confusion occurred over the role of the common room and the title of 'warden' with some residents misunderstanding the title to be 'warder'. Whilst such errors appear comical they may reveal deeper fears relating to the role of settlements as a controlling body attempting to regulate and dictate how Spennymoor residents should use their free time. It is therefore not surprising when considering the economic conditions as well as the suspicions of residents, that early Settlement activity was characterised by the self-interest of the Spennymoor residents.

### **The Democratisation of Art.**

The overall changes in the accessibility of visual culture which occurred in the 1930s and 1940s have been interpreted as the democratisation of art.<sup>52</sup> The exclusion of vast numbers of the population from contact with the art world occurred along strong class lines. The transition from private collections to public institutions

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<sup>49</sup> BARS Report 1934-1935, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>50</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Report, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1932 p. 5, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE

<sup>51</sup> Marks, H. *Community Association and Adult Education*, London: National Council of Social Service for the National Federation of Community Associations, p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> Lord, *Visual Culture in Wales*, see p.174-192 and more generally chapter five for a discussion of miner artists and the exhibition opportunities offered to working class artists during this period.



was gradual and punctuated only by the unique and pioneering efforts of individuals and groups who recognised the importance of democratic access to art.<sup>53</sup> Changing curatorial attitudes in the late nineteenth century towards the extension of opening hours as well as weekend access, revealed attempts to cater for the leisure time of a working class audience.<sup>54</sup>

The link between art and settlement activity had been established at the turn of the twentieth century through the endeavours of T.C Horsfall. In 1901 his Manchester gallery merged with that of the newly established University Settlement. Writing in support of Horsfall's proposal, William Morris claimed 'There only can be one foundation for real art, the desire of the whole people to have it...this desire cannot exist while they are divided into 'cultivated' and 'uncultivated'...' <sup>55</sup> His art loan scheme to working men's clubs, mutual improvement societies and Toynbee Hall was a predecessor for later interwar creations such as CEMA and the touring exhibitions of the British Institute of Adult Education (BIAE).

A report conducted in 1945 for the BIAE argued that 'democracy cannot function satisfactorily in an uneducated community.'<sup>56</sup> The report also stressed the importance of arts and crafts in the 'liberation and full development of the

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<sup>53</sup> In 1773 Sir Ashton Lever who had opened a museum in his home Alkrington Hall in Lancashire published a notice in the local press which read 'This is to inform the Publick that being tired out with the insolence of Common People, who I have hitherto indulged with a sight of my museum, I am now come to the resolution of refusing admittance to the lower class except they come provided with a ticket from some Gentlemen or Lady of my acquaintance.' Quoted by Chadwick, 'Practical Aids to Nineteenth Century Self-Help,' p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Chadwick, 'Practical Aids to Nineteenth Century Self-Help,' p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Morris quoted in Stephens and Roderick, *Samuel Smiles and Nineteenth Century Self-help*, p. 57.

<sup>56</sup> The role of art within adult learning carried a distinctly apolitical appeal to educationalists within Britain. This again reaffirms prevalent middle class attitudes which believed that art should reflect an improvement in working class taste as opposed to being a social or political comment. This ideology is clearly illustrated by a brief comparison with Weimar Germany during the same period. Here, attempts to bring the working classes into contact with art were propagated by both the Social Democratic and Communist parties. The belief that 'art should become an integral part of everyday life' reflected the intensity of political activity within the country. Art was utilised by these groups as a means of persuasively presenting crucial political issues in an educative and stimulating way. In 1926, Wertheim Department store presented an exhibition by artists who had joined the Künstlerhilfe. From this there followed a series of exhibitions, the Volkstümliche Kunstschaufen. The importance of this art was regarded in its ability to 'mobilise and strengthen political beliefs, stimulate the workers' self confidence and feelings of solidarity to their class.' The working classes were thus actively being engaged with and encouraged to partake in the production of socially critical art. The potential of visual art to influence the working class was recognised by the Nazi party who when in power destroyed much of the art work from this period, dismissing it as 'Entartete Kunst'. Guttsman, W.L. (1997) *Art for the Workers Ideology and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 115-124.

personality.<sup>57</sup> Helen Lowenthal was equally confident that the role of art was integral to the education of the working classes. Writing in 1948, she argued,

Art history, as has so often been said, is almost the perfect subject for the under-educated man. Provided that it is not accepted as the sole method of art appreciation, it can enrich and vivify the scant and scattered historical knowledge of the ordinary man to an amazing degree. It can illuminate philosophical ideas, relate history and literature, throw light on dark and remote periods before either history or literature was recorded, and show psychological continuity in human development. In addition, it can give the class a shared experience in seeing actual works of art when visits to galleries and museums form part of the course. I do not believe that there is any other subject which so swiftly carries a man beyond his mental parish.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of art within the adult education movement was demonstrated by the increasing number of published works aimed directly at the working class market. Commenting on two recently published works on art appreciation in 1932, the *Journal of Adult Education* reviewer explained how these works were intended to help the philistine and the man-in-the-street. The tone of these works reflected the audience they were intended for, 'The fact that they may appear superficial to the university student, and even irritating at times...does not matter, for they are not intended for him.'<sup>59</sup>

Reflecting the growth of interest in art related material directed at the working class, the British Institute embarked upon an art loan scheme. The response to this was wholly positive from educationalists. In 1935 Armitage summed up the current interest in art in the journal *Adult Education*, 'The outstanding value of the Institute's experiment appears to me to lie in the expectation suggested that the general public will want to see pictures and, furthermore, will experience in the seeing of them some definite reaction of pleasure or pain; will behave in fact as though they have been properly educated.'<sup>60</sup> The desire to quicken the working classes cultural and

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<sup>57</sup> BIAE, (1945) *Adult Education After the War, A report of an inquiry made for the British Institute of Adult Education*, London: Oxford University Press, p. vii, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Lowenthal, H. (1948) 'Adult Education through Art- For All', in *Adult Education*, June XX, No. 4, p. 176.

<sup>59</sup> The two works which featured in this review were Dobson, M. (1932) *Art Appreciation*, Isaac Pitman and sons, and Coxon, R. (1932) *Art: An Introduction to Appreciation*, Isaac Pitman and sons. 'Book Reviews', *The Journal of Adult Education*, Vol. VI October 1932, pp. 104-105.

<sup>60</sup> Armitage. F.P, (1935) 'Art in English Education' in *Adult Education*, VII, no. 4, June, p. 309.

artistic perception clearly brought about changes in the overall accessibility of art.<sup>61</sup> Despite the enlightened approach in bringing art to the working classes, the distinctive feature of these accounts is the condescending tones expressed by writers. In the above quote it is clear that whilst the working classes might not be more educated, they would at least give the superficial impression of appearing cultured.

The creation of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts occurred in 1944 with funding from the Pilgrim Trust in the form of an initial grant of £25, 000. This move reflected the positive response to exhibitions previously organised by the British Institute of Adult Education. The BIAE had developed a touring exhibition titled 'Art for the People' which was based on the 'axiom that it is impossible to improve the standard of public taste in art so long as there exist, outside the bigger towns, few, if any opportunities for looking at pictures.'<sup>62</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s questions remained about the role of art in satisfying the educational needs of the working class. Popular debate questioned whether adult education should be 'concerned' with culture and the arts.<sup>63</sup> To begin with, there was the premise that art was mainly the prerogative of the wealthier classes. Thomas Sharp, who was later to play an instrumental role in the post-war reconstruction of the region, dismissed the benefit of art education. Essentially art was viewed as impractical to the specific needs of the unemployed,

What fools are the working classes to be taken for that they should be handed baubles like these to be played with while their bellies are empty and their lives are falling to ruin before them? 'Well-intentioned suggestions'... 'should be encouraged in handicrafts and kept quiet at social service centres and settlements.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Marks, *Community Association*, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> The locations for the first set of exhibitions were Barnsley, Swindon and Silver End near Braintree. These areas were selected according to the strength of the WEA movement there. The exhibition comprised of approximately 60-70 paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth century French and English schools. The project was led by W.G. Constable. It was reported that the exhibition at Silver End attracted 10, 000 people and was a huge success. In order to encourage LEAs to hold exhibitions, half of their original contribution was to be repaid to them by the Board of Education. An interesting feature of these exhibitions was the employment of guide lecturers 'The function of these was not so much of Guide Lecturer as of eaves dropper, or even agent provocateur: that is to say it was their job to provoke discussion.' BIAE, 'Art for the People: a British Institute Experiment in Adult Education', p. 183. Williams. W.E. (1939) 'Art for People' in *Art and Education*, No.5, July, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Jessup, 'Adult Education and the Arts,' p.118.

<sup>64</sup> Sharp, *Derelict Area*, p. 45.

In contrast, arguments in favour of providing art education recognised that it was 'not mere escapism;'<sup>65</sup> Jessup writing in 1949, claimed that,

Compared with such subjects, the arts take on a superficial appearance; life is real and earnest, and in it the arts seem to have only the function of an unessential decoration....history, economics, psychology and politics have mainly an intellectual appeal, the arts evoke emotional as well as intellectual responses...what is necessary is that we should recognise that adult education is legitimately concerned with the arts, that the arts are an essential part of life, not a mere frill, and that that concern will express itself, in a variety of ways, not all of them direct and formal. Adult education can help, amongst other ways, by ensuring that its own material is always presented in accordance with accepted canons of good taste.'<sup>66</sup>

The role of art as a means of personal liberation demonstrates the enlightened response of educationalists in improving the overall political, cultural and economic standing of the working classes. However, Jessup's point is limited by the last line of the quote in which he argues that adult educationalists should present material in 'accordance with accepted canons of good taste.' Here Jessup reinforces the concept that working class education must first conform to the tastes of social superiors.

Following the creation of CEMA, the organisation worked together with the BIAE to provide a comprehensive series of exhibitions which toured factories, social centres, public galleries and private organisations such as the settlements. In 1944 alone, the CEMA and BIAE had exhibited in 208 art galleries and 522 other venues.<sup>67</sup> The work of these organisations was recognised by the press who celebrated the fact that 'It is at last being publicly recognised that the arts must not be war-time casualties.'<sup>68</sup> Overcoming geographic constraints was not an easy task. Jessup writing for *Adult Education* complained that even the travelling exhibitions were seen by a limited number of people. Jessup argued that every town should have its 'own permanent collection, worthily housed, of examples of the visual arts...' For Jessup

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<sup>65</sup> Jessup, 'Adult Education and the Arts,' p.120.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 117, 122.

<sup>67</sup> Conekin, B.E. (2003), *The Autobiography of a Nation, The 1951 Festival of Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 124. From 1942-1943 the BIAE organised 132 exhibitions of original paintings and 120 of prints and reproductions. CEMA, (1943) *CEMA Bulletin*, No.33, January, p. 14. Following the creation of CEMA the number of organised exhibitions increased.

<sup>68</sup> *The Observer*, 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1940.

the problem lay in the fact that 'the provincial, unless he lives in one of the dozen or so large towns, can indulge an enthusiasm for the visual arts only when he visits London or one of the great provincial centres, or when, if ever a travelling exhibition comes to his district.'<sup>69</sup>

Of course the BIAE and CEMA recognised that for their intervention to be a success they had to break down the traditional barriers which had previously prevented widespread participation in art appreciation, such as geography and class. Within the region cultural activity by the BIAE and CEMA appears to have been quite extensive. The extent of CEMA's involvement in providing art within the region can be highlighted by the fact that between the months of January and December 1944, exhibitions were held at 13 different locations across the region including Spennymoor, Bishop Auckland, Gateshead, South Shields, Newcastle, Felling and Barnard Castle. The organisation also awarded a local grant to the Ashington artists.<sup>70</sup>

As well as numerous art exhibitions, CEMA also organised an extensive range of concert fixtures, some of which were in direct association with the Council others paid for by the various Institutes. In examining the proposed calendar of fixtures for March 1945, is it possible to see not only the depth of this provision but also its geographic variation, covering extensive areas of the region (table 5 CEMA Events March 1945).

Nevertheless, CEMA acknowledged the demand for exhibitions came not only from 'strongholds of the arts' but also from the 'new and smaller places freshly made art conscious.'<sup>71</sup> Spennymoor certainly could be included as one area with a growing interest in art. In fact, the Settlement's report for 1944 noted, 'The Sketching Club's only complaint is that pictures do not come here often enough'.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Jessup, 'Adult Education' p.121.

<sup>70</sup> CEMA (1944) *The Fifth Year. The End of the Beginning. Report on the work of CEMA for 1944*, London: Curwen Press, p. 33, 17-18. The report also reveals that in the same year the organisation made over £1, 436 from hiring fees. p. 23.

<sup>71</sup> CEMA (1945) *CEMA Art Exhibitions 1945*, London: Baynard Press.

<sup>72</sup> Spennymoor Settlement Thirteenth Annual Report, 1944 p. 2, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

Nevertheless, the exhibitions that did travel to Spennymoor included the works of artists such as Lucien Pissarro, Augustus John and Stanley Spencer.<sup>73</sup>

The choice of pictures was carefully considered in order to create a positive response from a working class audience. The BIAE stated its purpose as 'not to impose an artificial sense of good taste upon the local community, but simply to "expose" them to the novel experience of seeing a representative collection of good pictures of all kinds.'<sup>74</sup> Despite worries that exhibition content 'Might fail completely to ally itself with local and social or industrial interests',<sup>75</sup> CEMA and the BIAE worked in collaboration with the Tate and the Royal Academy to present a range of exhibitions which reflected the 'extraordinary growth of interest in good painting'.<sup>76</sup> Examples of exhibitions included The Glasgow School, the Camden Town Group, contemporary British artists including Victor Pasmore and Ben Nicholson as well work by the Impressionists and the Bauhaus artist Paul Klee. It was a comprehensive mix which reflected both a wide ranging time scale and a variety of schools.

As well as CEMA's own programme of travelling exhibitions, collections were available to hire. Varying costs ranging from £2.10s for exhibitions based on CEMA's collection and contemporary paintings to £5 per week for the Tate Wartime Exhibition.<sup>77</sup> The popularity of exhibitions was revealed in the CEMA's profit for the year 1944 where exhibition fees accounted for £1, 436 of the organisation's income.<sup>78</sup> Both CEMA and BIAE printed a series of lithographs and prints based

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<sup>73</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of life*, p. 21.

<sup>74</sup> BIAE 'Art for the People' p. 183.

<sup>75</sup> The temptation to present art tailored to the specific background of industrial areas was resisted despite claims that 'It might prove, for example, that an emphasis on the relation of art and industry would be the most appropriate mode of approach to people in a Northern industrial town, and, in other cases, local history might provide the basis of the choice of pictures.' It was more widely upheld that to raise the standards of working class taste it was essential that exhibitions move away from the industrial scene and to present a challenging and stretching programme of exhibitions which represented the national art collection. *The Tutors' Bulletin of Adult Education*, (1934), No.2, Vol. VIII, December p.153.

<sup>76</sup> CEMA (1942) *A Selection from the Tate Gallery's Wartime Acquisitions*, London: Curwen Press. Foreword. This exhibition was shown at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne from August 14<sup>th</sup> -September 4th 1943, where it was followed by another CEMA exhibition of Modern French Paintings.

<sup>77</sup> CEMA, *CEMA Art Exhibitions 1945*.

<sup>78</sup> CEMA, *The Fifth Year. The End of the Beginning*, p.23.

upon their collections which included Cezanne reproductions and copies of work by Spear and Piper.<sup>79</sup>

The desire of middle class educationalists to cultivate working class taste extended beyond art appreciation. F.P. Armitage made his views plain when he expressed his hopes that institutions would provide further exhibitions relating to furniture and textiles, claiming 'With the general public in its present stage of aesthetic education, such an exhibition would, perhaps, be even more likely to lead to the quickening of appreciation of good colour and design than exhibitions of pictures.'<sup>80</sup> Many middle class educationalists perceived in the working classes 'an aesthesia to visual sensation'.<sup>81</sup> It was believed that art could provide the answer to improving the visual and cultural judgment of the labouring classes whose everyday lives were thought to be aesthetically devoid. As early as 1918, industrial conditions were regarded by the Adult Education Committee as having a devastating effect on the working classes, 'Too little attention has been paid in the past to the reaction of the physical environment on the aesthetic and moral standards of the people. Contact with ugly and depressing surroundings tends gradually to dull the finer senses.'<sup>82</sup> It was clear to Lowenthal that 'The cure for insensibility is the intense cultivation of the imagination and the experience of the inner satisfaction which it brings.'<sup>83</sup>

By the 1940s, the improvement of working class taste was viewed as an essential factor in influencing the planning of New Towns.<sup>84</sup> The journal *Adult Education* expressed this view repeatedly in its articles,

No form of education should be more stressed, since if public taste is left in its present state there can be little hope of achieving a higher standard of design for the new towns than is at present visible in the public buildings of the inter-war period.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> Armitage, 'Art in English Education,' p. 316.

<sup>81</sup> Herbert Read argued 'Insensibility is not a class distinction much less a national or racial distinction. Insensibility to beauty and truth, to goodness and glory, is found in offices and colleges no less than in slums and railway carriages.' Read quoted in Lowenthal, 'Adult Education' p. 174.

<sup>82</sup> *Interim Report of the Committee on Adult Education Industrial and Social Conditions in relation to Adult Education*, (1918) cd. 9107, London: HMSO, p. 83.

<sup>83</sup> Lowenthal, 'Adult Education' p. 174.

<sup>84</sup> Rosenau, H. (1941) 'The Approach to Art in Adult Education', in *Adult Education*, September XIV, p. 42.

Many people concerned in adult education, the faithful core of WEA stalwarts, are the very people who will have the appointing of city architects and planners. If they cannot be given a wider sense of good design, the prospects of the New Look are pretty poor.<sup>85</sup>

CEMA's 1945 exhibition 'Design at Home,' aimed to improve the aesthetic design of working class homes. The exhibition catalogue explained how, 'It is equally necessary to combat the idea that these homes must look standardised. Anything that will encourage a display of individual taste and an interest in the pleasant task of home-making, beset by difficulties though it may be, is to be desired.'<sup>86</sup> Perhaps this was a direct reference to the standardised row of monotonous colliery homes that could be found in communities across the North East?

The overarching theme of the exhibition was that 'You are the designer of your home,' and that the working classes have 'the ability to triumph over the deadening effects of standardisation by the exercise of personal judgement and taste.'<sup>87</sup> The catalogue advised its audience,

Without cluttering up a room with too many obsolete family possessions and souvenirs, as our grandfathers were in the habit of doing, it is not necessary to go to the other extreme of puritanical emptiness...Well chosen paintings and prints, to be varied perhaps from time to time; the books and ornaments that you have gradually acquired...all these make the home human in a way that is both personal and creative.'<sup>88</sup>

However, in advising the working class on how to decorate specific rooms in the home, the catalogue is prescriptive using annotated pictures detailing the exact type of cooker, utensils and even curtains. For the study/lounge the catalogue suggests rose patterned curtains manufactured by Courtaulds Ltd. and designed by Graham Sutherland.<sup>89</sup> Again questions have to be raised as to the extent in which these exhibitions were aimed at instructing working class taste to mimic that of their social superiors. CEMA's recommendations also lacked an element of financial realism.

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<sup>85</sup> Lowenthal, 'Adult Education' p. 176.

<sup>86</sup> CEMA, (1945) Design at Home, London: Curwen Press, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 15.



Table 5 CEMA Events March 1945.

March	Venue	Performance
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Newcastle-on Tyne Laing Art Gallery	Cyril Perfect ( <i>violin</i> ), Norman Suckling ( <i>piano</i> )
	Newcastle-on-Tyne City Hall	Peoples' Concert (10 <sup>th</sup> series), 3 <sup>rd</sup> Concert. Brenda Thompson ( <i>soprano</i> ), Peggy Lynn (contralto), Hindley Taylor (tenor), Fred McIntyre (baritone), George H. Sutcliffe (organ), Wilfred L. Anderson (piano), Peoples' Concerts Chorus, George Dodds (conductor).
5 <sup>th</sup>	Newcastle Area	Factory Tour. Mary Hamlin (soprano), March 5 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> ; Millicent Ward (soprano), March 12 <sup>th</sup> - 16 <sup>th</sup> ; Betram Harrison (piano).
7 <sup>th</sup>	Malton Grammar School	Factory Tour. Eve Maxwell-Lyte (soprano), Joan Davies (piano)
	Westerhope, North Walbottle Miner's Welfare Institute Whitby, County School Whitley Bay, Congregational Church, Livingstone Hall Wylam, Methodist Church	Helen Anderson (soprano), Sylvia Spencer (oboe), Margot Wright (piano)
8 <sup>th</sup>	Hatfield, Parish Church	Broadcast Concerts from Historic Buildings (No. 3). Philharmonic Harp Trio, John Francis (flute), Watson Forbes (viola), Marie Korchinska (harp), Margaret Ritchie (soprano)
12 <sup>th</sup> 13 <sup>th</sup>	Newcastle-on-Tyne, Laing Art Gallery Ferryhill, Mainsforth Miner's Welfare Hall Amble, Brown Memorial Hall	Arthur Alexander (piano recital) Maria Thompson (soprano), John Tainsby (tenor), Nicholas Roth (violin), Ella Pounder (piano)
14 <sup>th</sup> 15 <sup>th</sup>	Easington Colliery, Parish Hall Morpeth, Town Hall	John Tainish (tenor), The Carter String Trio: Mary Carter (violin), Anatole Mines (viola), Peggie Sampson (cello)
15 <sup>th</sup>	Newcastle-on-Tyne, Laing Art Gallery	Watson Forbes (viola), Denise Lassimone (piano)
19 <sup>th</sup> -28 <sup>th</sup>		Factory Tour. Edna Walker (soprano), 19 <sup>th</sup> - 23 <sup>rd</sup> , Molly De Gunst (soprano) 26 <sup>th</sup> -28 <sup>th</sup> , Charles True (baritone), Cecil Dixon (piano)
20 <sup>th</sup>	Darlington Music Society, Mechanics Institute	London Belgian Pianoforte Quartet
21 <sup>st</sup> 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Durham Music Society, Town Hall Newcastle-on-Tyne, Laing Art Gallery	Harry Isaacs (piano recital)
23 <sup>rd</sup>	Newcastle-on-Tyne Concert Society, Durant Hall Bishop Auckland Music Society, County School	London Belgian Pianoforte Quartet
23 <sup>rd</sup> -28 <sup>th</sup>	Newcastle Area	Y.M.C.A Tour. Vaughan Tremanye (bass), Cecilia Keating (violin), Angela Dale (piano)

24 <sup>th</sup>	Sunderland Art Gallery	Harry Isaacs (piano recital)
25 <sup>th</sup>	Bridlington Music Circle, High School for Girls	London Belgian Pianoforte Quartet
29 <sup>th</sup>	Newcastle-on-Tyne, Laing Art Gallery	Rosemary Rapaport (violin), Fanny Waterman (piano)

Source: CEMA Bulletin, No.59, March 1945, p. 3-4.

It is impossible to gauge the exact response from the general public to the art that was included in these exhibitions. Educational journals relate positive responses and large turnouts but the exact impact of viewing exhibitions often remains unclear. The Welsh artist Cedric Morris exhibited his landscapes, flower paintings and portraits at the Dowlais Settlement in 1942. He claimed that this exhibition created a great deal more enthusiasm than CEMA exhibitions.<sup>90</sup> Likewise Spennymoor residents expressed a preference for the work of Cornish over that of Tisa Hess.<sup>91</sup> There may have been a strong preference for the work of the local artist, but it may also have reflected the particular taste of local audiences.

### **Art in Spennymoor.**

Albert Mansbridge expressed the limited expectations of educationalists, 'It should be made plain at the outset that adult students have not set the Thames on fire with their writing. Their contribution has been modest, unobtrusive and, very largely ephemeral.' He continues by arguing that 'In the arts and crafts, for example, there are many amateur practitioners, although very few seem to have carried their work to any notable degree of achievement: for this economic factors are again primarily responsible.'<sup>92</sup> The economic factors referred to are presumably full time employment which prevented any serious dedication to the pursuit of artistic acclaim. Mansbridge's claims were to be challenged by the work of the Spennymoor artists whose work attracted both widespread curiosity and praise.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales*, p. 227.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Enid and Freda Rounsley 17<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Mansbridge, A. (1920), *An Adventure in Working-Class Education Being the Story of the Workers' Educational Association*, London: Longmans, Green and co. p. 128-9, 138.

The Spennymoor Settlement's Sketching Club never boasted a large membership. At its time of inception there were six members including Farrell. The group who met twice a week was distinguished by the early talent of two men. These were Bert Dees who was a local painter and decorator and John Heslop who was a miner at the Dean and Chapter Colliery. Dees acted as the 'founder-tutor' of the group. Both men are said to have received some tuition from Jack Evans.<sup>93</sup> Exhibiting for the first time at the Settlement's inaugural annual exhibition, both men were recognised as landscape painters working in the mediums of oil and watercolour. This first exhibition was in many ways a monumental step in altering the character of Spennymoor. *The Northern Echo* reported how 'Spennymoor took unto itself, a new distinction yesterday. To organise an art exhibition in a town which it was never supposed had any pretensions to be regarded as a centre of the finer forms of artistic expression is in itself a splendid achievement.'<sup>94</sup>

The group often relied on donations of paint and materials in order to work.<sup>95</sup> They began exhibiting in exhibitions outside of the Settlement. In 1932, the artists displayed their work at Durham Castle alongside the work of artists from other Settlements and groups within the county. It was reported that the quality of work was a source of amazement to visitors. The Second Annual Report, however, makes reference to a particular aspect of this exhibition, the commercial sale of work. 'One Striking feature of the exhibition was that the two settlements were the only exhibitors who were not selling their goods. Other groups were definitely soliciting orders. The Durham Settlements believe that such practices are harmful'.<sup>96</sup>

In 1933, the Settlement held its own exhibition of work produced by Spennymoor artists in which one hundred and fifty pictures were exhibited.<sup>97</sup> A change in commercial attitude can also be noted over the following years. By 1938,

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<sup>93</sup> Hall, M. *The Artists of Northumbria* p. 104-105, p. 166.

Evans was an accomplished amateur artist who had been a miner in Spennymoor. Evans did not depict the mining community. However, he was knowledgeable about art history and his advice was welcomed by both Dees and Heslop. McManners and Wales, *Shafts of light* p. 103.

<sup>94</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1933.

<sup>95</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Second Annual Report, May 21<sup>st</sup> 1932-1933 p.2, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.3-4.

<sup>97</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Third Annual Report 1933-1934, p. 4, , DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

the Eighth Annual Report noted how residents were now saving up to buy work from the exhibitions. It was clear to Farrell that 'The prejudice against work done by people who "live in the street" is breaking down, and the painter may yet come to be honoured in his own county.'<sup>98</sup> Cornish was singled out during this exhibition as a 'nineteen year old pit-worker' who has shown a distinct talent for portraiture in oils.<sup>99</sup>

The work of the Sketching Club initiated a strong debate within Spennymoor with regard to subject matter. It was an argument which characterised wider discussion relating to the suitability of subjects within working class art.



Figure 50  
Norman Cornish and Donald Mather, Northern Regional Director of the Arts Council, Nineteenth Annual Exhibition of Paintings, Spennymoor Settlement.

The content of working class art was of considerable interest to a wide audience. John Harvey's analysis of Welsh mining art argues that for miners 'art was neither a profession, nor, properly, a hobby but variously a political voice, a distraction, and a means of coming to terms with their dismal environment.'<sup>100</sup> In many ways, Harvey regards mining art as a social voice in which miners, as victims

<sup>98</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Eighth Annual Report 1939, p. 4

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>100</sup> J. Harvey, *Miner-Artists*, p. 2.

of their circumstances, can draw attention to their social plight and material deprivation. Yet the use of art as a political voice was not a feature of the sketching clubs agenda. The work presented by the Settlement artists was a demonstration of their skill and interests. As Dr. Pace noted, the art work produced in Spennymoor was 'not so much an impression of what the artist saw as an expression of his own experience.'<sup>101</sup> Farrell confirmed the motivation behind the sketching club as 'painting simply because we want to paint.'<sup>102</sup>

The improvement of working class aesthetic taste was an integral part of artistic education within the adult school movement. It would appear ironic that whilst the movement aimed to improve the aesthetic sensibilities of the working class by demonstrating the visually displeasing aspects of colliery village life, at the same time the working classes were using their environment to develop a distinct mining aesthetic. The Interim Report of the Education Committee argued that prolonged exposure to poor surroundings meant that the working classes accepted their environment without any visual aspirations to improve on it. 'The streets along which men and women walk daily, the buildings they pass in their goings to and fro, the polluted atmosphere, all insensibly influence the inhabitants of every town. Long familiarity with the dreariness and dirtiness of town life must generally tend to weaken the desire of the majority of the inhabitants for more wholesome and more inspiring surroundings, and the old order is perpetuated.'<sup>103</sup> Loyalty to the mining scene was a disturbing issue for many social commentators who saw little beauty in contemporary mining life. As the Interim Report makes clear, environmental improvement would be delayed for as long as the working classes remained insensitive or loyal to the mining aesthetic.

Yet Farrell interpreted the situation differently, arguing that the aesthetic taste of the working classes had been impaired not by their dull surroundings but by other forms of popular entertainment. Despairingly the warden saw the greatest challenge as convincing the working classes that there is beauty in the colliery scene,

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<sup>101</sup> Dr Pace quoted in *The Northern Echo*, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1933.

<sup>102</sup> *London Calling*, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945 no. 319 p.13. Extract from the 'Art for Everyone Series', Farrell's broadcast for the BBC.

<sup>103</sup> Interim Report of the Committee on Adult Education Industrial and Social Conditions in relation to Adult Education, (1918) cd. 9107, London: HMSO, p. 90.

But we have first got to convince most of our working-class people that their own kind are worth portraying. They cannot conceive it possible, because their tastes have been debased, and their eyes blinded to the beauty on their own doorsteps by the lights of the cinemas, and by all the other forms of so-called art and entertainment. A picture of a velvet-breeched boy (Eric-Little-by-Little) holding out an apple to a white pony given away with somebody's soap is considered 'art'. Whilst a painting done by the young working-lad next door, is at most only 'like a real picture.'<sup>104</sup>

It would appear that the challenge was two-fold for the Spennymoor artists. Not only was there a need to justify the production of mining art to a wider audience but there was also difficulty in persuading local residents that it was real art.

Despite the club painting because they wanted to, the nature and interpretation of their work remained under scrutiny. Responsibility was placed upon the miner artist to relate the hardships of colliery life to the wider public. The dangers of mining life became a popular theme within mining art. This is illustrated vividly in the work of the Ashington miners and in the paintings of Tom McGuinness. John Harvey regards such work as neither constituting a 'diversion from nor a broader outlook upon the miners' work.'<sup>105</sup> Escapism was not the intention of these artists. Elsie Robinson was vocal in her criticism arguing that in 'An age of unrest, a district of suffering, an industry seething with trouble and changes to come-and its artists only produce lovely landscapes and portraits. Leave that to the luckier south...The Spennymoor Settlement Sketching Club has shown that it can match the masters of the past in skill; now let it show the present that it has a message that only it can give.'<sup>106</sup>

Joe Corrie's views on the subject were included in the 1927 March edition of *Miner*, in which he argued 'these torrid pit wheels towering in the sky, and that chimney too: how nice that part of the landscape would have looked without them. All these houses, row on row, with half a dozen washings hung on slanting poles. What an eyesore. I think they ought to be shifted.'<sup>107</sup> Whilst Corrie encouraged

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<sup>104</sup> Batten, E.M. *An Educational Policy*, BARS, Autumn 1939 p.7, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>105</sup> Harvey, *Miner-Artists*, p. 6.

<sup>106</sup> *Northern Echo*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1941.

<sup>107</sup> Corrie, J. 'Photography as a hobby' in *Miner*, 12 March, 1927 quoted by Harvey, *Miner-Artists*, p. 10.

miner-artists to turn away from the industrial landscape, there were many who believed colliery life constituted a fit subject for a 'distinctively Welsh art.' Harvey describes Corrie as being out of step with developments in the visual culture of Wales in the first half of the twentieth century, he argues that 'After 50 years of ruminations on the nature of a notional, national art, cultural commentators exhorted professional artists to depict the vulgar, ugly, and simple facts of contemporary Wales in the spirit of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch genre painters.' <sup>108</sup>

In depicting the colliery village as suitable artistic matter, miner artists were forced to justify the value of the scene. By 1939, Spennymoor life was the main focus of the Spennymoor artists. Farrell confirmed this in the Settlement's Eighth Report, writing 'Slight changes in matter and method are showing themselves, there being more emphasis on the purely local scene and character'.<sup>109</sup> In the same year Farrell confirmed his commitment to the aestheticisation of mining, 'I contend that the pitman painter should paint pit folk and pit life, as Franz Hals painted his Dutch people, and as Breughel painted his peasant folk and the beginning dramatist, poet, novelist, actor, sculptor, and all the other artist craftsmen should portray the lives of their own kind, living in their own streets'.<sup>110</sup> Several years later Cornish himself was to cite the influence of Breughel in his own depictions of Spennymoor life.<sup>111</sup> That Farrell was an influential factor within Cornish's artistic development is clear.

In chapter one, some of the wider influences on Cornish were discussed and it was noted that despite remaining largely self-taught, the artist demonstrated a broad artistic knowledge. His often sophisticated depictions of Spennymoor drew heavily upon the work of established artists such as Breughel, Degas and Van Gogh. Farrell's influence on Cornish can be noted in three particular ways. Farrell guided Cornish towards the subject matter of Spennymoor and in doing so established Cornish as a genre painter impressing on the artist the style and vision of Breughel. Secondly, he provided Cornish with a wider art history background, by encouraging the artist to read about art he also enabled him to establish a firm knowledge of

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>109</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Eighth Annual Report, 1939, p. 4, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>110</sup> Batten, *An Educational Policy*, p.7

<sup>111</sup> See chapter one, p.57-58.

movements, schools and styles. Thirdly, and partly because of the financial difficulties of the Settlement, Farrell encouraged the commercial side of Cornish's career. In this sense he acted as an agent to Cornish, promoting and selling his work.

William Farrell was to be the only warden of the Spennymoor Settlement and during this time he cultivated a central role for both the Settlement and the sketching club. By 1945 Farrell had taken hope from the fact that the community were fully supportive of the settlement. 'It is pleasant to record that the Town now feels that the Settlement is its own peculiar organisation and one which the Town will go to some lengths to preserve'.<sup>112</sup> His enlightened social policy it was reported had convinced the residents that in Spennymoor 'there may still be some things worth living for.'<sup>113</sup>

Educational journals of the period considered the skills of the warden as pivotal to the success of the Settlement. The warden's post is regarded by one report as one of great responsibility which will set the tone for the character and activities of the institute. Importantly the warden's 'real interest in his fellows' was deemed even more crucial.<sup>114</sup> Cornish recalls how Farrell appeared to him as a 'worldly man.'<sup>115</sup> Compared to Cornish, who at this point had been as far from home as Blackpool, Farrell was a man who had been places and understood things. Farrell was an authoritative figure and if he had not overruled Bert Dees the sketching club 'tutor,' Cornish would not have been permitted to join the sketching club until he was older.

In 1934, the *Morning Post* described William Farrell as 'a slight sensitive nervously artistic man, physically and temperamentally as far removed from a Durham miner as a Saluki from a Lurcher.'<sup>116</sup> Despite the notable difference in Farrell from his Settlement members, there was something about Farrell that inspired both loyalty and respect. This is perhaps not so surprising considering the ethos in which the ideals of the Settlement were based. Farrell's direct approach to the inherent problems of Spennymoor demonstrated a pragmatic realism which clearly

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<sup>112</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement, Fourteenth Annual Report, p. 1, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>113</sup> BARS Report 1934-1935, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>114</sup> BIAE, (1945) *Adult Education After the War, A report of an inquiry made for the British Institute of Adult Education*, Oxford University Press, London, p. 48-50.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, January 2005.

<sup>116</sup> *Morning Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1934.



endeared him to local residents, 'Firstly, we consider all our work is educational. As you are aware our town is small enough to be viewed as a whole, and we see our town as being largely composed of mining families. We see our town as it is and make no bones about telling all our members what it looks like.'<sup>117</sup>

His arguments surrounding the social conditions of miners were also appealing, 'miners should have good wages and homes, and towns and living conditions, and should have opportunities to develop themselves in whatever direction they may choose, and so become BETTER MINERS.'<sup>118</sup> It is interesting to note that Farrell is clear in his overall aim of delivering 'better miners' as opposed to cultivating the latent talents of miners so that they may find alternative careers away from the pit. Nevertheless Farrell's actions with his protégés Cornish and Chaplin demonstrated a change in this ideology. Farrell was instrumental in carving alternative careers for both men. The following section will explore the role of Farrell as a bohemian cultural improver as suggested by Vall. It will also consider a more commercial aspect which could explain Farrell's lengthy stay in Spennymoor.

The role of William Farrell as warden of the Spennymoor Settlement has received considerable attention in the work of Natasha Vall. This research suggests that the wide appeal of Cornish, amongst both popular audiences and bohemian intellectuals, is central to understanding key processes of cultural change in the North East during the twentieth century, such as the transition from voluntary to state led 'cultural policy'. Engaging with the work of Colin Campbell, Elizabeth Wilson and Johnathan Rose, Vall argues that the unique economic circumstances of Durham attracted the attention of middle class bohemians whose interest in poverty served as a creative process essential to their self-identification. Arguing that this bohemian interest continued to be a feature of mining patronage beyond the post-war years, Vall regards the Spennymoor Settlement as marking the intersection between working class artists and middle class intellectuals. In this account, the role of Farrell is central to the process as the warden is viewed as underlining the connection between middle class interest in working class life and the growing 'aestheticisation' of the working class's own experience.

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<sup>117</sup> Batten, *An Educational Policy*, p.5.

<sup>118</sup> Farrell quoted in Batten, *An Educational Policy*, p. 6.



Figure 51  
William Farrell  
Daffodils  
Oil

Farrell can therefore be identified as drawing on earlier traditions of liberal and moral improvement but also as representing the new influence of middle class Bohemians 'whose attraction to mining districts...reflected an interest in poverty as a creative requirement of self-identification.'<sup>119</sup> In becoming the warden at Spennymoor, Farrell was able to experience firsthand, material deprivation which many cultural improvers found to be an essential part of their own creative development. After spending time at Toynbee Hall it is clear that Farrell subscribed to the concept of living with the poor as both a creative and beneficial experience in the process of self-identification. Such a move was regarded by some as bold but unnecessary.

On the role of early settlements, Stocks describes how 'the rich could live if not actually *with* these strange foreigners, at any rate among them.'<sup>120</sup> Octavia Hill was doubtful that the middle classes would find living in settlement conditions tolerable. Writing in 1885, on the decision of Canon and Mrs. Barnett to reside permanently at Toynbee Hall, Hill argued 'that the strain of living *in* the worst places would be too trying *yet* to educated people...I should urge the spending of *many* hours weekly there, as achieving *most* just now, because it is less suicidal than the

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<sup>119</sup> Vall, 'Polishing the Pitman,' p.165.

<sup>120</sup> Stocks, M.J. (1953) *The Philanthropist in a Changing World*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, p. 10.

other course and more natural.’<sup>121</sup> Farrell’s commitment to this experience was to be more complete than spending a few philanthropic hours a week helping the poor.

Vall highlights several themes which confirm Farrell’s involvement in Spennymoor should be interpreted as a bohemian experience in search of authenticity, creativity and self-understanding. The role of Settlements in providing social education for university students was well documented. E.M. Batten understood the benefits to students and urged them to view settlements as ‘a valuable storehouse of information and laboratory.’ She concluded that ‘The more students know about the conditions under which people live and work the better.’<sup>122</sup> Farrell also understood the settlement movement to be a creative experience in which pioneering social work could be undertaken. Robert Peers confirms the role of the settlement as enticing for its social content, ‘One of the attractive features of work in adult education lies in the fact that so much of it is new educational territory. The pioneering spirit is still strong in the movement, and a wide field for experiments in method is open to the tutor who sees in the problems which his classes present a challenge to his professional acumen and skill.’<sup>123</sup>

Vall argues that by 1936, the bohemian in Farrell was frustrated by the cultural remoteness of County Durham; the warden wanted to return to town.<sup>124</sup> Indeed Farrell made plain his desires in an application to the BBC stating that, ‘Experimental sociological work is becoming stabilised and taken over by officials. The exciting, original field work is over. Wife and self wish to return to town.’<sup>125</sup> This confirms Vall’s thesis that Farrell’s purpose in the North East was not simply economic but also creative and professional. The need to return to town also affirms the cultural contradictions of bohemianism, in which the experiences of Farrell’s time in Spennymoor could only be processed in a metropolitan setting, near the ‘centre of transmission.’<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Octavia Hill quoted in Stocks, *The Philanthropist in a Changing World*, p. 10.

<sup>122</sup> Batten, E.M.(1939) ‘Students and University Settlements’, *The New University*, February.

<sup>123</sup> R. Peers ed. (1934) *Adult Education in Practice*, London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, St.Martin’s Street, p. 115.

<sup>124</sup> Vall, ‘Bohemians and Pitman Painters,’ p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> William Farrell, BBC Application 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1936, DUL SPE GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>126</sup> Vall, ‘Polishing the Pitmen,’ p. 180.

There is no question that Farrell's arrival in Spennymoor provided the realisation of both his creative bohemian desires and his interest in cultural educational reform. What remains unexplained are the reasons which caused him to remain in Spennymoor. Clearly by 1936, Farrell had shown a desire to leave Spennymoor and return to town, yet if he had realised his own process of self-identification then why did he remain in Spennymoor for a further 18 years after his unsuccessful application to the BBC? Clearly the experiential and pioneering work in County Durham had in Farrell's opinion come to an end and after five years of working in the provinces so perhaps had Farrell's own experiential aspect of his bohemian ideals.

The Prussian Countess, Tisa Hess, can be used to highlight how Farrell's stay in Spennymoor extended beyond bohemianism. In a letter from Hess to Farrell, the artist recalled her time in Durham, 'I built up a world of my own –Durham became the land of my dreams-I sketched and sketched for years...If I hadn't had this world, which gave me courage and support, I don't know how I should have borne it.'<sup>127</sup> In this quote Hess is recalling her personal quest for self-identity which was answered by her time at the Settlement. The experience of Hess is more akin to the bohemian quest for identity which Vall discusses. In this sense the artist experiences poverty and hardship and has directly related that experience within her work, returning to 'town' once these needs had been met.

Perhaps Farrell's restlessness in Spennymoor could be traced back to 1934 when in the Annual Report he noted several changes in the composition of the Settlement. Whilst he argued that 'the spirit rather than the matter' had altered, the Settlement was now attracting a younger audience. Positively Farrell felt confident to view the Settlement as becoming more established in local affairs. The regular art exhibitions held by the Settlement were an important factor in influencing community interest. Along with the drama productions, the exhibitions were open to the public and whilst they acted as a source of publicity they also began to alter perceptions about the quality of work produced.<sup>128</sup> The setbacks in his own personal career

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<sup>127</sup> Undated Letter from Tisa Hess to William Farrell, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>128</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement Report, 1933-34, p. 4, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

could be charted alongside the blossoming of the Sketching Club's regional reputation.

The sketching club's wide acclaim as 'The Pitman's Academy' confirmed its growing popularity.<sup>129</sup> It is in conjunction with the development in the sketching club that Farrell's role as warden took on a further dimension. Between 1936- 39, Farrell cultivated the sketching club's thematic interest and its commercial outlook, whilst attempting to carve out alternative careers for several of his young protégés, particularly Cornish. Vall argues that Farrell was first an artist and secondly a liberal educator. Yet if artistic ambitions were Farrell's foremost concern then the stagnation of his experience in 1936 should have marked an end to his time at Spennymoor; it did not. There indeed appears to be a crossover between Farrell's own self identification and the creative development of his students. It has been claimed that at the end of a sketching session, when most members had left, Farrell was often found rescuing a discarded Cornish sketch from the waste bin.<sup>130</sup> It would appear that after 1936 Farrell's own bohemian quest for authenticity and self-identity had failed and success could only be achieved through his most talented students. From this point Farrell acted almost as an agent attempting to publicise and bolster the careers of certain students who demonstrated potential.

Cornish claims he found the early guidance of Dees to be instrumental.<sup>131</sup> Acting in a paternalistic fashion, Dees took the young Cornish under his wing. Cornish was to accompany Dees on many sketching trips around Spennymoor, often sketching alongside Dees as he took his inspiration from the rural landscape. Yet despite the early influence of Dees, Cornish was not to replicate him in style or subject matter. Instead the artistic lineage of Dees was to prove more significant to Cornish. It was through Dees that Cornish was to become familiar with well known artists such as Byron Dawson and T. W. Pattison. Cornish summarises this debt saying that not only was he living in his own time but because of the older man's knowledge, he was able to live in Dees's time as well.<sup>132</sup> In this sense Cornish was able to absorb the artistic knowledge that Dees had to offer. It was perhaps a

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<sup>129</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement, Sixth Annual Report, 1936-1937, p. 4, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.p. 3

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, January 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.,

formative relationship that was to characterise Cornish's insatiable demand for biographical knowledge relating to popular artists. The County Library a regular destination for Chaplin was also indispensable to Cornish. Here he was able to plug the gaps in his knowledge of the art world.

Two landscape watercolours hang on the living room wall of Cornish's Spennymoor home; one by Bert Dees and the other by John Heslop. In Cornish's opinion these two men, both members of the sketching club, acted as his mentors and it is with this debt in mind that their pictures hang in his home today (figure 52 photograph of landscape painting). It is interesting to note that whilst both Dees and Heslop were predominantly landscape artists, Cornish did not follow the same path in subject matter, choosing instead to focus upon the industrial scene.



Figure 52  
Bert Dees  
Photograph of landscape painting at Cornish's Spennymoor home.  
Title unknown

1936 was a definitive year in terms of thematic development and direction of the sketching club. Whilst Dees and Heslop remained landscape painters, the sketching group began to focus on the town's industrial heritage. Without question this change in direction was directly attributable to Farrell. In Vall's bohemian narrative the Settlement was a 'paradox' in which attempts to draw the mining community out of itself elicited the opposite response. Yet this over simplifies the situation. Cornish was firstly recognised for displaying talent in both portraiture and landscape but soon looked to the mining community as his subject. Both Cornish and McGuinness were directly influenced by Farrell in this way. However, the older

members of the group used Spennymoor as their subject matter whilst also painting the rural landscape as they had done previously. The individual development of the Club's artists was further emphasised during the Second World War when some decided to make artistic comment on the conflict. Robert Heslop's *Bombardment*, 1941 is one such example.

Within the Club, a strong variety of style, technique and subject matter was present. Likewise, the artists were continuously drawing from Farrell's knowledge, the experience of Dees as well as their own and combining all of this with their reading. Regularly exhibiting at the Artists of the Northern Counties exhibitions held at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, offered further opportunities for wider exposure for the Settlement artists. In this case, they were able to exhibit their work but also to see that of professional artists. Similarly, touring exhibitions organised by CEMA as well as contact with artists such as Tisa Hess were all factors which diluted the actual naivety of the Spennymoor artists.

In 1969, William Farrell was recognised as being the 'North's talent scout for arts'. The article described how Cornish was one of 'many talented men guided to their best work by Bill and his colleagues.'<sup>133</sup> The commercial value of the Sketching Club's work was noted at an early stage. When materials were short and donations difficult to find, it made sense to sell the work in order to buy further materials. This situation had also occurred in Ashington. In 1946, Farrell's correspondence to his friend Arthur Jones, who lived in Ringwood, Hampshire revealed the financial difficulties of the Settlement and how plans to sell work might alleviate these problems. Jones optimistically believes, 'I consider that we really have got something. I really mean it...I could sell profitably those pictures of Dees, Heslop and Co.'<sup>134</sup> The furniture of Jack Green was more problematic, Arthur writes, 'I have had a chat with an Arts and Craft shop in the Isle of Wight and I found the lady there as concerned with the quality of the wood as she was with the workmanship.'<sup>135</sup> Farrell appeared less optimistic about sales replying to his friend, 'whatever you can do

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<sup>133</sup> *The Northern Echo* 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1969.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from Arthur Jones to William Farrell, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1946, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*,

ought to benefit us.<sup>136</sup> Examples of Green's workmanship were recently on display at *The Pitman's Academy Exhibition* 9<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> October, 2006 at the Tom McGuinness Gallery, Bishop Auckland (figure 53 below).



Figure 53

Wood carvings by Jack Green on display at  
*The Pitman's Academy Exhibition* 9<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> October 2006.  
Photograph.

It was at this point that the career of Cornish began to move beyond the Spennymoor Settlement. In 1946, the artist held his first 'one man' exhibition in Newcastle and the following year his work attracted the attention of the National Coal Board. Vall acknowledges that by the 1940s new agencies were emerging to continue the work where cultural improvers left off. For William Farrell, this post-war period was marked by increasing financial difficulties and eventual decline of Settlement activity. The Pilgrim Trust's official funding ceased in 1947. Over a period of 16 years it was estimated that the Trust donated over £10, 000 '...the main fact is that the Trust has been the main financial support for sixteen years, and that is the cornerstone of whatever edifice now stands in the town, and in the hearts of the

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<sup>136</sup> Letter from William Farrell to Arthur Jones, 2<sup>nd</sup> July, 1946, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.



members.<sup>137</sup> Farrell too acknowledged that 'the existence of the Settlement today depends to a considerable extent upon the prosperity of the town.'<sup>138</sup>

Farrell's departure from the Settlement in 1954, was one which caused him great personal anguish. After his departure, the Farrells moved to Abbotsley, Hunts. Elisabeth Farrell became headmistress of the local school, unlike her husband who was unable to find employment. Farrell was now 60 years of age and felt 'isolated in the midst of the agricultural plain...' In a letter to Lord Kilmaine of the Pilgrim Trust he wrote 'I have heard nothing officially from the new group of members now in control at Spennymoor. I believe they have kept the theatre open, and are trying to do what they can to keep going. They have no money, and no staff, and I'm afraid have a difficult row to hoe. I have not been able to write a report of the last months at Spennymoor. It was all very distressing and unnecessary.'<sup>139</sup> Farrell's friend Arthur Jones noted the irony of Farrell being placed in the circumstances which he had spent his whole life trying to eliminate from society.<sup>140</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

The Spennymoor Settlement was created as a result of the prevailing economic hardship experienced in communities across interwar Britain. Coinciding with the increased debate surrounding the education of adults, William Farrell approached his work at Spennymoor in a liberal fashion. As warden he initiated a programme of events which reflected his interests in art and drama. His influence on the members of the Sketching Club was immense. Natasha Vall has understood Farrell's time in Spennymoor as part of his own cultural and intellectual development. She argues that Farrell's arrival in Spennymoor was part of a bohemian quest to find his own self-identity. Certainly this may have been the case at the beginning of his time at the Settlement. It does, however, become apparent that Farrell's creative time in Durham comes to an end at an early stage. Yet the warden continues to remain in Spennymoor. Farrell's abandonment of his original aims must be considered in light of the growing reputation of the Sketching Club members. The

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<sup>137</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement, Sixteenth Annual Report, 1947, p.8, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>138</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement, Seventeenth Annual Report 1947-48 p.1, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>139</sup> Letter from William Farrell to Lord Kilmaine, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1955, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Arthur Jones to William Farrell, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1954, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

increasing press interest together with growing sales ultimately influenced the outlook of the warden.

For Norman Cornish, Farrell's early tuition was key. Acting almost as an agent, the warden guided Cornish in both theory and practice. The Settlement experience formulated much of Cornish's later career. Interestingly, Farrell encouraged Cornish to develop his art education by advising the artist to attend night schools and even attempting to obtain employment for him in a Newcastle art shop.<sup>141</sup>

Farrell retained an active interest in Cornish's development after the Settlement, as correspondence between himself and Ronald Marshall demonstrates. Farrell very much regretted the fact that he was unable to secure Cornish funding to attend a larger school of art. He claimed that failure to achieve this meant that a talent would not be wasted but would take longer to come to 'fruition'.<sup>142</sup> The post-war career of Cornish will now be examined in the following chapter which focuses on the role of the National Coal Board.

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, January, 2005.

<sup>142</sup> The Spennymoor Settlement, Eighth Annual Report, 1939, p.4.

# Chapter four

## The National Coal Board: Patron of 'Mining Art'.



## The National Coal Board: Patron of 'Mining Art'.

The catalogue for the 1977 *Exhibition of Paintings- 60 years of Mining Art*, organised by the National Coal Board, billed the event as 'a chance to see the Coal Board in a different guise- as a patron of the arts.'<sup>1</sup> From its inception in 1947 under Attlee's post War Labour Government the NCB was to become keenly involved in the promotion of mining art and miner artists. Such was this interest that the Coal Board actively collected art, hosted exhibitions and even provided custodianship of important collections. This section will examine the role of the NCB as a patron of the arts from 1947-1980. Indeed, this period encompasses both the initial optimism associated with nationalisation and the eventual decline of the industry. The support given by the organisation to artists from within the industry, including Norman Cornish, will be considered specifically. What motivated the NCB's interest in art and in what ways did this benefit Cornish's career?

### **Nationalisation and a changing image.**

The nationalisation of Britain's mines in 1947 was a symbolic and important moment in the history of the coal industry. The background to nationalisation was characterised by a record of decline in output, workers and wages, all of which suggested long term tendencies rather than temporary difficulties. Labour relations had been deteriorating for several years prior to the General Strike in 1926. However for many this event confirmed the necessity of nationalisation.<sup>2</sup> The decision to nationalise the mines offered the prospect of improved industrial relations and conditions of labour. Kynaston describes stirring scenes as collieries across the country raised the NCB's flag, speeches were made, banners were unfurled and brass bands played.<sup>3</sup> For Cornish and Chaplin, similar celebrations were underway at the Dean and Chapter Colliery, Ferryhill.<sup>4</sup> By 1947 Cornish had worked as a miner for fourteen years and during this time he had already noticed many tangible

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<sup>1</sup> Official invite to the exhibition, NCB, *60 years of Mining Art*, April 1977, TNA COAL 74/3320. The exhibition was open to the public Tuesday to Friday 10pm-5pm.

<sup>2</sup> Ashworth, W. (1986) *The History of the British Coalmining Industry, Vol 5 1946-1982 The Nationalised Industry*, Oxford: Clarendon. p.3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Kynaston, D. (2007) *Austerity Britain 1945-81*, London: Bloomsbury, p.185.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.186.

improvements such as the provision of pit head baths and paid holidays.<sup>5</sup> As will be discussed, the impact of nationalisation was to have a greater effect on the artistic careers of Cornish and Chaplin.

The restructuring of the organisation was an essential element of nationalisation and aimed to encourage greater efficiency. Significantly, the NCB acknowledged that much work was required in order to improve the perception of the industry. This image crisis was two-fold. From an external perspective the industry and its workers were viewed as backward and archaic. The mining community was often perceived as a dangerous sub-culture on the fringe of society. Journalist G.L. Wilson writes in 1947, 'You see, the nation still persists that the miners are some dreadful race apart, sub-human, delighting in squalor, intransigent, ignorant and anachronistic...' <sup>6</sup>

From an internal perspective the militancy and distrust which historically had coloured the relationship between miners and managers needed to be overcome. Importantly, observers recognised that success would come from within and that the NCB should reflect the needs and interests of their workforce. For many outside commentators the problem was apparent, 'The nationalised coal industry will never be a success so long as the NCB approaches its problems from such a capitalist standpoint and fails to take the miners more fully into its confidence.' <sup>7</sup>

The establishment of the Public Relations Branch was part of the NCB's response to the growing image crisis which the industry was facing. The extract below summarises the aims and measures implemented by the Public Relations Office in order to tackle the image crisis of the organisation,

The Public Relations Branch of the NCB puts this booklet before you. It is engaged in precisely this work; the making known to the public, and particularly to those who work in the coalfields, what is being done. It produces a monthly magazine 'Coal' and a newsreel 'Mining Review' exhibited through the commercial cinemas. It produces numerous booklets like this; designs and exhibitions and lecture campaigns and

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<sup>5</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life* p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *The Post*, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1947.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Statesmen and Nation*, 25<sup>th</sup> June, 1949, p.662.

generally does all it can to make the whole world recognise the status of industry and of those who work in it.<sup>8</sup>

What motivated the NCB to develop such a comprehensive approach towards arts patronage?<sup>9</sup> At the centre of this policy rested the need to develop and present a positive image of the industry. Clearly promoting the art produced by miners went some way to destroying the historic representation of the miner as uncouth and uncultured. The conflict within the term 'pitmen painter' was brought into question and through careful cultivation the NCB attempted to portray the miner in a more positive light.

By the 1970s, the NCB faced extensive problems in the shape of pit closures, strikes and industrial decline. Still committed to its art policy, the organisation believed that its endeavours here would help in some way towards the cultivation of a better public image. In an internal memo dating from 1979 the official stance towards art patronage is laid out. The principles summarised within this document reflect the policies adopted by the Board as well as the lessons that had been learnt over the years. Importantly it reaffirmed the Board's commitment to its role as a patron of art. The points discussed here will be considered in depth as they represent something of a blueprint in terms of the National Coal Board's approach to promoting the work of artists such as Cornish. The memo states the following,

As a large nationalised industry, it seems a proper part of the function of the Board to encourage however modestly and obliquely a link with the contemporary cultural art world, in addition to the industrial, scientific and commercial worlds which are more directly its concern. This can be done in several ways.

- a) By keeping an eye on the day-to-day art 'scene' to locate the work of any artist choosing to derive inspiration from the industry or its background...
- b) In particular to help artists from within the industry such as Norman Cornish and Tom McGuinness, and more recently, Cyril Ifold. The Board have played their part in fostering their work, by purchase and with exhibitions. This should continue as an exercise well worthwhile and not only from the viewpoint of good public relations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Reynolds. C. Deputy Director of Public Relations, *'The First Year' being a summary of the National Coal Board's Annual Report for 1947*, NCB, p.5, NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

<sup>9</sup> In terms of the financial benefits of investing in art, the disagreement concerning the value of the Freeth collection (discussed later in this chapter), demonstrates the Board's ignorance of the value or potential value of art works. This in itself reinforces the idea that the NCB's interest in art collecting was predominantly a promotional exercise.

<sup>10</sup> Memo Subject: Marine Paintings, dated 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1974, TNA COAL 30/574.

The memo discusses how locating fresh talent is a matter of vigilance and goes on to cite the missed opportunities of Herman and Moore.

In the 50s there was the student work of Peter Coker (now a notable R.A) who brought his drawings of pits to Hobart House<sup>11</sup> but found no official response and no buyers...Opportunities like this will come seldom: the coalmining scene is not one that immediately attracts many artists and, in any case, a deal of discretion is needed to differentiate the important work (from an historical and industrial viewpoint) from the trivial.

The focus and interest of the NCB's collection was managed tightly. Areas of the industry which were not represented in the collection were highlighted and then sourced. For example the Board was keen to acquire a marine painting and as a result an instruction was issued to 'let galleries and auctioneers know that the Board were interested in moderately-priced marine paintings which had some relationship, however distant, with coal.'<sup>12</sup>

From the above extracts it is clear that the Board's policy of collecting art and providing patronage was well considered. That the Board chose to highlight miner artists from the North East and Wales recognised these areas as the two main geographic locations of mining art. Further correspondence supports the interest in specific geographic locations as part of the search for new talent. A memo from 1974 details arrangements for 'some of the 'home-grown' coal industry paintings, presently held in South Wales, to be seen at Hobart House.'<sup>13</sup>

Specifically, over the years, the Board displayed a particular interest in the work of Cornish, McGuinness and the Welsh artist Cyril Ifold (figure 54 *Untitled*).<sup>14</sup> All three were working miners, self-educated family men, well respected within their community who demonstrated a keen talent in painting and drawing. They were ideal

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<sup>11</sup> Hobart House was the London based headquarters of the NCB. It was often used as the venue of NCB organised exhibitions. The majority of the art collected by the NCB was displayed here whilst other works were loaned to regional offices nationwide.

<sup>12</sup> Memo Subject: Marine Paintings, dated 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1974, TNA COAL 30/574

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>14</sup> The NCB collection at Hobart House included two works by Ifold, both dating from 1973. Ifold's mining career mirrored that of Cornish, as he too entered the pit aged only 14. Ifold who lived in Ystradgynlais, South Wales was largely self-taught. However he was to attend evening classes and was tutored by a local artist Arthur Powson. Ifold often painted portraits of miners. However, landscape painting characterised his later work. Ifold's first one man exhibition was held in 1956. The following year, the artist won the National Coal Board's *Open Competition of the British Mining Industry*. McManners and Wales, *Shafts of light* p. 199 and also Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p.17.

ambassadors for a modernised mining industry. In many respects these artists were more useful to the NCB because of what they represented than what they actually painted.



Figure 54  
*Untitled*  
Cyril Ifold  
Oil on board  
c.1970s

The artists who emerged from coalfields across the country and especially in the North East were promoted as shining examples of educated and articulate miners working in a modernised mining industry. Norman Cornish was to feature in *Coal* magazine, *Mining Review* and was included regularly in exhibitions organised by the NCB in London and other cities across Britain. The following sections will consider how the NCB initiated their arts policy through the creation of a professionalised mining press, the organising of exhibitions and the permanent custodianship of collections.

### **The Mining Press.**

Coalmining magazines provided an opening for miner artists to demonstrate their artistic capacity as illustrators. 'Miner-artists, for their part, gave the mining press a professional look, which helped promote an impression that miners were organised, resourceful, and in step with the times.'<sup>15</sup> The growing recognition of miners' abilities to draw was realised in 1927 when a supplement to *Miner* was launched. The objective of *Black Diamonds* was to 'unearth some of that burning

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<sup>15</sup> Harvey, *Miner Artists*, p.2.



literary, political, and artistic talent which exists all through the British coalfields.<sup>16</sup> Following nationalisation, the NCB re-launched its magazine. With a more professional glossy image, *Coal* magazine encouraged the work of miner artists by publishing pictures of their work and through feature articles. The look and layout of *Coal* (figure 55) bore strong resemblance to the photojournalistic magazine *Picture Post*, first published in 1938.



Figure 55  
Front Cover of *Coal* Magazine June 1947.

From 1947 to 1952 *Coal* featured a series of portraits called 'Pit Profiles' which had been commissioned by the NCB from the artist Hubert Andrew Freeth.<sup>17</sup> Over a period of five years the artist produced over 100 profiles of NCB employees. Freeth was a professionally trained portrait painter and etcher and even though he was not a miner, the commission served to demonstrate that mining art continued to play an important role in the mining press.<sup>18</sup> Freeth was already a successful artist, therefore the commission should be understood as a promotional exercise on behalf of the NCB. The profiles included employees of all positions and ranks within the organisation (figure 56 *Herbert Humphrey*). The accompanying text revealed details

<sup>16</sup> *Miner* (1927), No. 31, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Townsend, *Coal Faces*, p.87

<sup>18</sup> H. Andrew Freeth had trained at Birmingham College of Art. He was a skilled engraver and won the Prix de Rome scholarship. He was appointed as an Official War Artist in 1943.

of the worker, his position, how long he had worked there but also discussed his hobbies and interests. The profiles captured real life NCB workers and 'gave formal recognition to the silent heroes, whose contributions played an equally valuable role within the industry.'<sup>19</sup> The initial cost of the commission in 1947 was £75.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 56  
H.A.Freeth  
*Herbert Humphrey*  
Pit Profile no.27  
Watercolour

Interestingly a memo published in 1979 advises caution when considering future commissions such as the mining portraits produced by Freeth. It was decided, 'this however is a form of patronage which must be exercised sparingly and with caution. It would best be approached in consultation with the leading Art Department and colleges (e.g. in Newcastle and Durham) but could bring great credit to the Board.'<sup>21</sup>

The formality of Freeth's portrait can be contrasted with Cornish's perceived spontaneity. Cornish mainly depicts his miners in a social setting. When he does depict a miner on his way to work or descending the gantry steps, they are often drawn without facial detail or with their back to the artist. It is mainly in close up

<sup>19</sup> Townsend, *Coal Faces* p. 88

<sup>20</sup> Memo from D.G James, Re: MacDonald Request, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1973, TNA COAL 30/574.

<sup>21</sup> Memo J. Reading to D. Brandrick, Re: The NCB and Art, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1979, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81, TNA COAL 30/ 515.

portraits that Cornish focuses upon and accentuates the facial features of the subject. In *Laughing Domino Player*, (figure 57) Cornish captures the character of his subject as he continues his conversation or whilst he engages with his activity. The thick black outline of flowmaster pen or charcoal accentuates the features of the subject. His style here has been described as being ‘almost Hogarthian in quality’ for the way in which he caricatures his subjects.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 57  
Norman Cornish  
*Laughing Domino Player*  
Flowmaster pen on paper

The same sense of informality is discernable within the 32 portraits included in the exhibition *Some Men of the North East* held at the Stone Gallery in 1969. These charcoal or charcoal and pastel sketches, were drawn on a huge scale with some measuring 44 x 30 inches whilst each one had an accompanying title revealing the sitter's personality (see figure 58 *The Singing Man*, figure 59 *The Staring Man*, figure 60 *The Sporting Man*, figure 61 *The Young Man*). Critical response was mixed with one journalist commenting how the sketches lacked depth of character whilst the sitters appeared to be ‘decked out in what look like giant stick on plastic ears.’<sup>23</sup> His spontaneous sketches achieve a more intimate but perhaps exaggerated portrait. Their size combined with the exaggeration of facial features makes the men appear grotesque, distorted and in the case of *The Young Man*, a little sinister (figure 61).

<sup>22</sup> *Yorkshire Post*, 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> *Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1966.

Certainly *Some of the Men of the North East*, would be inappropriate for the Board's aim of cultivating a more respectable and appealing image of the miner. Certainly, official NCB purchases demonstrated a preference for Cornish's mining landscapes, domestic drawings and street scenes. These works presented a wider portrayal of the mining community whilst also demonstrating the sense of cultural harmony and shared outlook. Altogether, they represented a less threatening image of the miner.

The contrast in style can be further noted when examining Cornish's formal portraits, executed as commissions for private individuals. In these examples the sitter, who is rarely a miner, is portrayed very differently. Instead of thick charcoal outlines, these portraits are carried out using oil or pastel, the effect being more flattering on the sitter. The sitter is positioned formally facing the viewer as opposed to *Laughing Domino Player* which tends to suggest that the scene was not posed but 'captured' by the artist. Naturally in wanting to please the sitter, Cornish avoids the embellishment of facial features which are common within his informal portraits.



*The Singing Man*

Figure 58



*The Staring Man*

Figure 59

Exhibition catalogue *Some Men of the North East*, Stone Gallery 1966.





*The Sporting Man*

Figure 60



*The Young Man*

Figure 61

Exhibition catalogue *Some Men of the North East*, Stone Gallery 1966.

Cornish's art featured in *Coal* magazine on several occasions. In 1960 the magazine included an advertisement in which Cornish had been commissioned by Matthias Spencer & Sons Ltd. The company specialised in coal cutting and mechanical handling equipment. The advertisement described,

Coal-mining is more than a job-it's a way of life. Being so, it has produced its own camaraderie, its own sense of humour-and not least its own culture. In the British mining community, there are many talented "between shift" artists, whose work is a deeply felt commentary on the miners' work and play.<sup>24</sup>

The image produced for this commission was 'The Pit Road' and the article stated that copies of the drawing suitable for framing could be obtained by writing to the commissioning company. A photograph of Cornish is included in the article along with a small commentary describing him as a stone-man at the Dean and Chapter Colliery but also as a widely exhibited artist. A quote from Cornish is included which describes the motivation behind the image,

after walking along this road regularly, winter and summer, it naturally becomes a significant part of one's life. To watch the man ahead of you, plodding resignedly through this man-made world is a subject which demands to be drawn again and again.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Coal*, April 1960, p.25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*,

The quote is well considered like all of Cornish's analytical descriptions. Likewise the use of 'one's' is not suggestive of the average grammar of a Durham miner. Describing the miner as 'plodding resignedly through this man-made world' does not sound an appealing experience. However, it is perhaps this firsthand experience that makes Cornish and other miner artists such a valuable commodity to the NCB. Their legitimacy as artists stems from their real knowledge and understanding of what it means to walk the pit road every day. It was their authenticity which enabled miner artists to gain wider recognition. The NCB clearly do not want to gloss over the realities of mining life but instead they want to balance the harshness with the camaraderie and the humour, the sense of being part of a community and a way of life. This is the exact angle from which Cornish approaches the subject matter. The loneliness and isolation of the miner on the pit road is in some way compensated by his heroism to keep walking along that road. 'Plodding resignedly' to the pit, Cornish's miner will find solitude in the companionship that awaits him at his destination. As both a miner and an artist, Cornish appeared an ideal representative for an industry eager to present its workforce in a positive light. Equally important for the NCB was the way in which Cornish portrayed the mining community in a realistic but often romanticised manner.

Seven years after becoming a writer for *Coal*, Sid Chaplin became a Public Relations Officer for the NCB. In an article in 1962, *Topic* described Chaplin's new post as 'tough'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed promoting the NCB in a positive light amidst the numerous pit closures across the region was an incredibly difficult task. Chaplin's employment at the NCB nevertheless afforded him many opportunities and his career followed a different path to Cornish's. On the publication of the *Leaping Lad*, the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote, 'The day may come when the Ministry of Fuel and Power will turn a jealous eye on anyone who shows signs of deserting the pit and taking to letters. Mr. Chaplin is one of several recent recruits and valuable recruits to a notable company.'<sup>27</sup> The dilemma of leaving the pit was not so problematic for Chaplin and as a feature writer for *Coal* he was able to combine his knowledge of pit life with his talent for writing. In an article published in *Coal* 1948 he was able to offer advice to

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<sup>26</sup> *Topic*, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1962, NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

<sup>27</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1946, NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

aspiring writers and artists, writing that 'real people should provide the raw material for your stories.'<sup>28</sup>

In his capacity as Public Relations Officer, Chaplin was often consulted on how best to promote the industry's talent. The NCB decided to produce an anthology film, '...the aim is to re-evaluate and re-use 20 years of Mining Reviews and internal film material, from a poetic, subjective point of view.'<sup>29</sup> Robert Vas was script writer for this particular issue and he contacted Chaplin for assistance. In a letter from Vas to Chaplin, the Hungarian born film maker requested the following amongst many points,

1. A library near a pit. (We may be more likely to find this in South Wales, but please give it a thought)...
7. I would like to visit and see the works of Tom McGuinness and Norman Cornish.

He also advised Chaplin to pre-warn collieries of the Film Board's intention to visit and of the need for co-operation.<sup>30</sup> Chaplin's position at the Coal Board enabled him to act as a mediator and promoter of regional artists. This role was obviously made easier by his regional connections and his growing status as a journalist as well as his growing public image.

Developing positive public relations was by no means an easy task within the North East. As one regional public relations officer described, 'The image of the industry has been our great difficulty. Despite what you say, I am afraid we do live here in a declining coalfield and everybody knows it. Moreover, they get frequent reminders-we've closed 4 pits in Durham this year and you know what lies ahead from the forward projections.'<sup>31</sup> One way to demystify the mining world was to invite the general public, especially school children and journalists, to visit underground mines. The problems with this were equally challenging to the public relations officers. Tom Dobbin summarised the issues when he wrote, 'My fears are that in the

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<sup>28</sup> *Coal*, December 1948 p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Robert Vas to Sid Chaplin, 22 November 1967, NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>31</sup> GL Atkinson, Area industrial Relations Officer to PM Moulin, Director of Manpower 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1974, DRO NCB 31.

North East open days could be counter-productive. Can we justify spending several thousand pounds on tarding up one pit for a one-day “public appearance” while we have been, and still are, closing so many others? I think of the headlines and the readers’ letters and I get bad dreams.’<sup>32</sup>

Masculine attitudes still prevailed and whilst pit open days were being encouraged, managers were selective over which visitors were granted entry. J.W. Banks, Administrative Officer for Westoe Colliery refused to let a group of female school children go down the mine on the premise that the experience ‘would probably be too arduous for girls.’<sup>33</sup> A further request was declined from a 15 year old boy who wanted to go down the pit. The refusal was based on the fact that he was too young.<sup>34</sup> Likewise the writer Judith Hilliam claimed to have been repeatedly declined permission by the NCB to enter a pit whilst male researchers were welcomed.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 62

Opening sequence of *Mining Review*.

Both Cornish and McGuinness featured in *Mining Review*, the NCB’s monthly cine-magazine. *Mining Review* started in 1947 and was distributed to over seven hundred cinemas across the country with a peak viewing audience of twelve million people. The topics covered were diverse, ranging from cultural activities within the community, such as mining ballads, to the mechanical developments within the

<sup>32</sup> Tom Dobbin PRO NE to J.G. Kirk Director of Public Relations, 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1974, DRO NCB 31.

<sup>33</sup> JW Banks Administrative Officer Westoe Colliery to PRO 28<sup>th</sup> January 1974, DRO NCB 31.

<sup>34</sup> Miscellaneous Correspondence, DRO NCB 31.

<sup>35</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1976. Vogue’s editor at the time Beatrix Miller must have looked particularly amusing to the miners when she visited a Nottinghamshire pit. She was described as ‘properly chic in tangerine boiler suite, black toe-capped boots and leopard spotted chiffon scarf under the regulation helmet.’ *Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> November, 1976.



industry and the increased professionalism of training (figure 63 Still taken from *Mining Review* showing Ashington Training College).<sup>36</sup>

Decisions as to what was to be included within each issue were discussed in a weekly editorial meeting which included representatives from the NCB, the NUM, Data the production company and the NCB film officer. The short films were intended to be informative, entertaining, educational and motivational. Originally produced by the Crown Film Unit, the NCB's own film unit took the over production in 1963.<sup>37</sup>

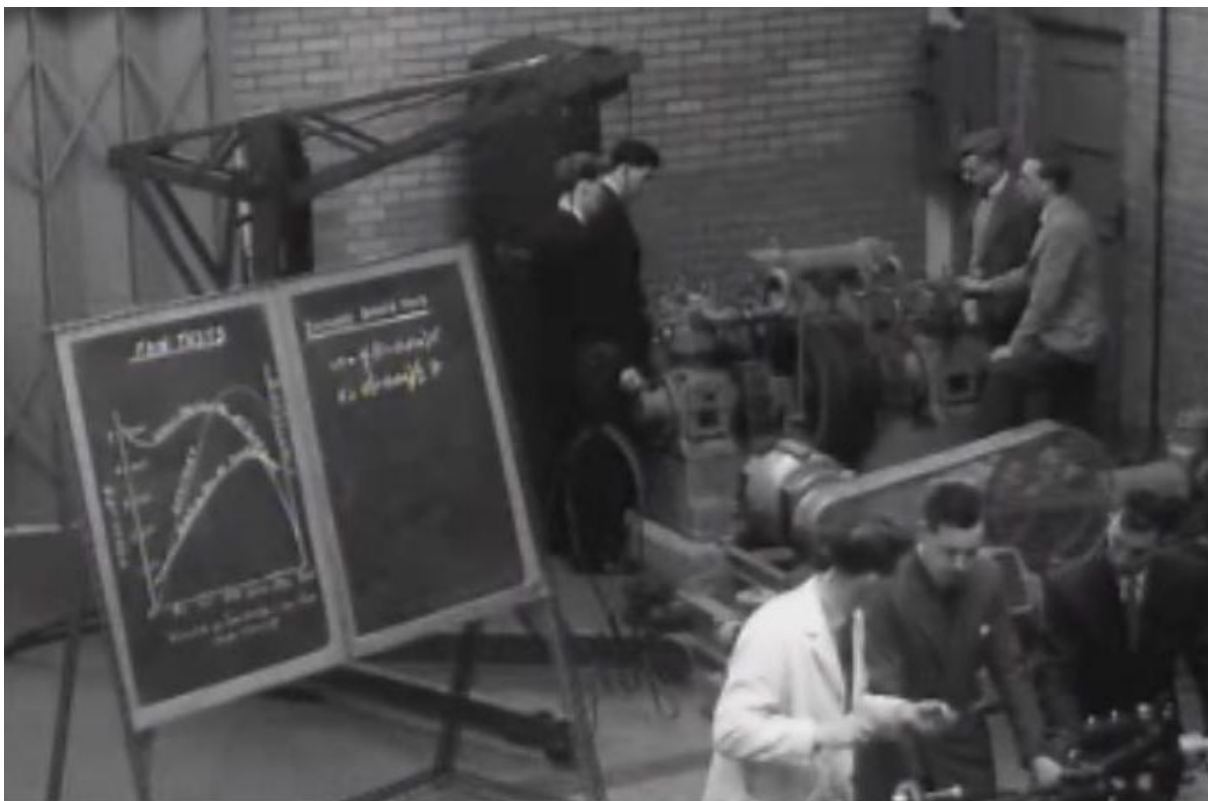


Figure 63  
Ashington Training College.  
Still taken from *Mining Review* 10<sup>th</sup> Year, No.11 (1957).

In 1963 Cornish featured in the 16<sup>th</sup> issue of *Mining Review*. This issue featured the following sections:

*New Homes For Old.*

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<sup>36</sup> *Mining Review* 1/1 1947 was titled 'The Miners Song' and was presented by Carroll Levis, BBC talent scout, radio and television presenter. The issue featured James Ovington singing 'The Miners' Song'.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Baker, Screen Online, British Film Institute, [www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/894075/index.html](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/894075/index.html).

For this feature Ewan MacColl sings a ballad story about the Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association's improvements to retired miners' homes. Flat capped miners are shown smoking their pipes. A shot of miners boiling water for an outside bath tub is then cut to show the modern bathroom with a water boiler. The Durham miner is even shown washing dishes at the sink.

*The Happy Wanderer.*

The Happy Wanderer pub at Framwellgate, Co Durham, displays its collection of mining relics.

*Supporting Programme.*

A demonstration of remote control self-advancing roof supports by the Institute of Mining Engineers in Manchester.

Finally the issue looks at the *Pitman Painter*. Cornish is shown with his hand in his pocket, wearing a blazer and looking out over Spennymoor. The commanding voice of narrator John Slater, speaking clearly in received pronunciation, describes how 'Miners have many interests they grow prize leeks, they sail boats, they serve as crew members in more than one of Britain's lifeboats. The list is as long as the pit shaft is deep.' The scene then moves to Edward Street, Spennymoor where a small boy is seen running and a little girl skips outside the front doorstep of the colliery house.

Inside the family home on Bishop's Close Street, Cornish is shown working on a pit gantry scene. Other family members are also shown; John is seen sketching and Sarah is seen fixing her hair. In the following scene Cornish is in the Lord Raglan Public House. Here he is shown wearing a shirt and tie, as is the pub landlord Harry Holmes. The men featured in the domino game which Cornish sketches are also wearing ties. Interestingly, when the camera shot reveals the finished sketch they are shown without ties.

The footage also makes reference to the recent mural commission which Cornish had just completed and was now hanging at Aykley Heads. The NCB once again demonstrated their support of Cornish by allowing the artist a period of absence from the pit in order to complete the commission. The narrator goes on to describe how acquaintances (mainly his Stone Gallery agents), urge Cornish to become a full time painter 'but Norman says his loyalty is to the pit.' The scene then shows Cornish sketching at the pit. The narrator confirms Cornish's popularity by

stating that 'his paintings find a ready sale up and down the country.' The NCB's patronage ensured the continuing advocacy of Cornish's art whilst importantly underpinning his regional success at the Stone Gallery.

There are twelve Cornish images used in the footage and they reflect the full range of his interest in mining life, combining paintings of the pit gantry, pub sketches and family activities. The NCB must have been pleased with the finished outcome and especially the positive endorsement of pit life from an artist who plainly expressed his dedication to pit work. Cornish is shown as a family man who enjoys his job and socialising with his work colleagues at one of the local pubs. The game of dominoes is an orderly affair and the pub scene is jovial but not unruly. The 'Pitman Painter' as the section refers to him, is an articulate miner artist who is himself a positive representation of a nationalised coal mining industry.<sup>38</sup>

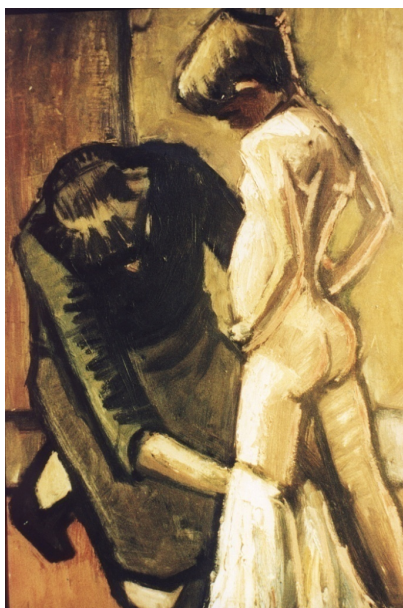


Figure 64  
Norman Cornish  
*Bath time Oils.*  
One of the images used in *Mining Review*.

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<sup>38</sup> Cornish recollects viewing his appearance on *Mining Review* at the cinema with his son John. The issue was shown prior to the John Wayne movie *The Alamo*. In his autobiography Cornish describes how, 'When we emerged from the cinema after the show, the little lad [John] didn't seem too happy. When I asked him whether he had liked the *Mining Review* film he replied "No, 'cos all the lads at school will have seen my backside and they'll laugh at me." I then realised that one of the paintings featured in the film was of John when younger, being dried in front of the kitchen fire by his mother after his bath. Ah, well you can't please everyone I suppose.' Cornish, *A Slice of life* p.62.

Tom McGuinness was featured in *Mining Review* in 1972. The section is called *Tom McGuinness* and the scene is initially set in the John Whibley Gallery, Cork Street, London where McGuinness's first exhibition is being hung and priced (figures 65-67 stills from *Mining Review*). The shot then cuts to show the artist back home at Bishop Auckland in the back lane of a row of terraced houses. The street scene that follows could quite easily have been lifted from a Cornish painting, as women stand on doorsteps and people are seen walking up the street, prams being pushed.



Figure 65

Still from *Mining Review*.

McGuinness is then shown descending into the pit at Fishburn Colliery and then drilling at the coal face. Following this scene McGuinness is filmed walking through the Durham countryside with his son before returning to paint in his studio.



Figure 66



Figure 67

Stills from *Mining Review*.

The film then cuts back to its opening setting and the preview of McGuinness's show which was attended by Lord Robens, the former chairman of the NCB. To close the feature, the film returns to Durham with a high angle shot of the traffic on the main street of Bishop Auckland. Gradually the camera pulls back to show the town.



Figure 68

Still from *Mining Review*.

The representation of McGuinness as a hardworking miner whose leisure time is either spent with his family or dedicated to his art is similar to the way in which *Mining Review* portrayed Cornish. Clearly both McGuinness and Cornish provided excellent subject matter to promote a modernised and enlightened mining industry. Their loyalty to the pit, the community and their family combined with their artistic talent confirmed these men to be ideal ambassadors for the NCB.<sup>39</sup>

### **NCB Exhibitions 1947-1980.**

The NCB's policy towards supporting and collecting art was often ad hoc, yet Cornish managed to secure fairly regular support, exhibitions and recognition. The Board's interest in his work was confirmed at the Fourteenth Annual Art Exhibition held at the Spennymoor Settlement in 1947. It was at this event that Dr Reginald Revans, Director of Education for the NCB purchased five Cornish works, one of which depicted a miner's wife *Washing Dishes*.

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<sup>39</sup> McGuinness was eventually made redundant in 1983 as part of the extensive pit closures of that period. The impact this had on his art is discussed in chapter seven.

In the same year Revans invited Cornish to assist in hanging a London exhibition he was organising. *Art by the Miner* opened in London and ran from 13<sup>th</sup> October- 2<sup>nd</sup> November with an accompanying catalogue titled *Exhibition of Art & Handicrafts by British Miners*.<sup>40</sup> Works by Robert Heslop from the Settlement as well as the Ashington Group were included in the exhibition together with seven pieces by Cornish. The show was a selling exhibition and artists were invited to price their work prior to exhibiting if they wished to sell.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately these prices are not listed in the exhibition catalogue.

Attached to the letter sent out to the exhibiting artists is a memo which states that,

The pre-view of the Exhibition "Art by the Miner" this morning aroused considerable interest. Among those present were six members of the Board and a number of Press representatives who appeared quite impressed by the standard of work. It was suggested during the morning that the Exhibition should be moved to other centres in the country in order to show it to a larger public.<sup>42</sup>

The Exhibition did in fact tour between April 1948 and March 1949 exhibiting at Wolverhampton, Bristol, Stoke on Trent, Doncaster, Sunderland, Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Belfast. The touring exhibition was featured in *Coal* magazine's December 1948 edition. *Art by the Miner* was then being shown to audiences in Edinburgh. Cornish's painting *Interior*, Heslop's *Pitheap* and the Ashington Group's Oliver Kilbourn with his painting of *Mother and Child*, were amongst the images used to illustrate the article.<sup>43</sup>

Seven works by Cornish were included in the exhibition, *Pony Putter*, *Granny*, *Interior*,<sup>44</sup> *Big Meeting*, *Dust*, *Colliery Row* and *Changing Marras*. Jack Green a fellow Spennymoor Settlement member also exhibited three wood reliefs at the show, *The Newsboy*, *Refugees* and *Durham Pit Lad*. The carvings are shown in a

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<sup>40</sup> National Coal Board (1947) *Exhibition of Art & handicrafts by British Miners Oct 13<sup>th</sup>-Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup> 1947*, London: Odhams Press Ltd., Long Acre.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Joseph Hallsworth Manpower and Welfare Member, National Coal Board to Jack Green dated 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1947.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>43</sup> *Coal*, December 1948, pp 6-7.

<sup>44</sup> Cornish's 'Interior' is described as 'one of the more valuable paintings we have at Headquarters.' Memo H.C.G. Slade, Head of General Services to Mr. F.E Antill, Industrial Relations Development, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1965, General Services TNA COAL 30/574.

photograph taken from the Spennymoor Exhibition held at the McGuinness Gallery, Bishop Auckland Town Hall in 2006 (see Figure 53). Interestingly Cornish remembers Green as being unemployed but extremely competent with the chisel. Green, however, was 'not an artist' and Cornish often created the designs for the wood carvings. One of the sketches produced by Cornish for Green was of a paper boy. This could well be the sketch that Green used to produce his carving of the news boy included in the 1947 exhibition.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 69  
Norman Cornish  
*Jack Green*  
Courtesy of John Heslop.

Cornish spent three weeks in London assisting in the organisation of the exhibition and whilst there was invited to appear on the long running popular entertainment series *Picture Page*.<sup>46</sup> *Picture Page* was broadcast live from Alexandra Palace and featured interesting people of note who were 'In Town'. Cornish appeared on the show, and afterwards was invited to the Savage Club, which, according to its website, remains today one of the leading 'Bohemian

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<sup>45</sup> Notes from a conversation between John Heslop and Norman Cornish, 23 May 2005.

<sup>46</sup> The series ran from 1936-1939 and from 1946-1952. Prior to 1949 the series was not recorded and therefore none of the earlier transmissions are existence.

Gentleman's Clubs in London'.<sup>47</sup> In his autobiography Cornish describes how he spent his evening at the Club in the company of Bill Hooper the caricaturist famously known as 'Raff' and the comedian Leonard Henry. Cornish's involvement with the exhibition exposed him to his first television appearance as well as to a glimpse of the social life enjoyed by London's cultural elite. The experience was a world apart from Cornish's Spennymoor life and yet the artist did not appear overawed by it. He naively assumed the Savage Club would be similar to a working men's club back home.<sup>48</sup>

In 1950 Cornish's work was to feature in the *The Coal Miners* exhibition held in London, a joint collaboration between the AIA and the NCB. The exhibition was a combination of professional artists such as Henry Moore alongside the work of miner artists such as Cornish. Inclusion in this exhibition created interest from the local press who eagerly sought an interview with the popular artist. The press articles relating to this exhibition show Cornish in his home on Catherine Street finishing off a painting. *The Northern Echo* even shows Cornish painting with his six month old daughter Ann in a high chair watching 'daddy putting the finishing touches to one of his latest paintings at his home, between his coal hewing shifts'.<sup>49</sup> Cornish exhibited seven works in this exhibition. Once again he was invited to London, and on this occasion he stayed with Fred and Diana Uhlman. Diana was secretary of the AIA whilst Fred Uhlman was an artist and writer who had emigrated from Germany. The exhibition received coverage in the NCB's regular cine-magazine. In the section called 'Official View', the exhibition was discussed with reference to participating artists such as Cornish, George Bissell, Harold Lightfoot and professional artist Geri Morgan.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1970s the National Coal Board was confident to combine art and design with industry. As promoter and patron of the arts the NCB had involved itself in many exhibitions and by the 1970s the organisation looked to assert itself in the design stakes as well. The support given to design exhibitions once again confirmed the modernity and innovation of the National Coal Board. Commissioned by the NCB

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<sup>47</sup> [www.savageclub.com](http://www.savageclub.com)

<sup>48</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of life*, pp 28-31.

<sup>49</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1950.

<sup>50</sup> *Mining Review*, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, No.10, 1950.



in 1972, the celebrated super yacht designer Jon Bannenberg produced a series of innovative fireplace designs. 'The coal fire becomes an art form' was catalogued and the commission was later advertised by means of encouraging the general public to 'let your imagination bring out the Jon Bannenberg in you...Apply your own creativity to achieve the luxury of a briquette fire with a difference.'<sup>51</sup> The designs were bold, bright and attempted to portray the modernity of the industry (figures 70 and 71 *images from the Coal fire becomes an art form*).



Figure 70  
Images from *The Coal fire becomes an art form*,  
The Bannenberg series of designs for the National Coal Board 1972.



Figure 71

The NCB often collaborated with other organisations in order to stage exhibitions. In 1975 the Coal Board along with the Design Council organised a design exhibition held at the Design Centre in London, this again demonstrated the NCB to be at the heart of modern interior design. The modern middle class designer home is in sharp contrast to the more simplistic pit life that Cornish was painting and yet both representations were embraced by the NCB to evoke the image of an enlightened and nationalised organisation.

In 1975 the Coal Board organised the *Industrial Art Exhibition*, 'an exhibition relating to Coal Mining' which included the work of the Ashington Group, Freeth, Crabtree and Bissell. Significantly the exhibition catalogue described the artist Sheila

<sup>51</sup> NCB, (1972) *The Coal fire becomes an art form*, *The Bannenberg series of designs for the National Coal Board* 1972, TNA COAL74/3978. *The Age*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 1973.

Fell as a 'Miner's Daughter' and likewise described Henry Moore as a 'Miner's Son.'

<sup>52</sup> This label perhaps justified their inclusion in an exhibition comprising mainly artists whose skills were self-taught. Cornish is described as an 'ex-miner, now full time artist.' He submitted two pieces for the exhibition *Back Lane at Night* priced at £225 and *Going in Under* £500. Both pieces were loaned by the Stone Gallery. The expensive price tags placed on Cornish's work are suggestive of the artist's increased popularity but also of his formal representation by the Stone Gallery.

The absence of Cornish from significant exhibitions during this period is worth examining in more detail. In April 1977 the NCB organised an exhibition to be held at Hobart House. *60 years of Mining Art*, included work by Tom McGuinness, the Ashington Group and Margaret Burlton (figure 72 Invite to the exhibition *60 years of Mining Art*). The custodianship of the Ashington Group's work at Graham House in 1975 will be discussed shortly. However, this situation obviously aligned the Group firmly with the NCB. As a result their work featured regularly in exhibitions hosted or co-hosted by the Board. The brief for the NCB's Chairmen Sir Derek Ezra described the exhibition as encompassing 'a period of about 60 years, so that it is a reflection both of how the industry has changed and how it has also continued to fascinate artists.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Industrial Art Exhibition 'An exhibition relating to Coal Mining' General Services, TNA COAL 30/574.

<sup>53</sup> Exhibition of paintings- 60 years of mining Art, TNA COAL 30/514.

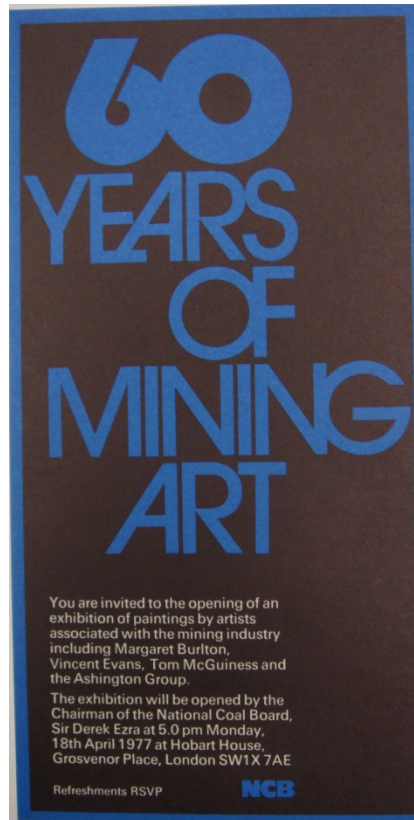


Figure 72  
Invite to the exhibition *60 years of Mining Art*  
(COAL 30/514)

Cornish's absence from this exhibition and other NCB shows is explained through correspondence with his Stone Gallery agent Ronald Marshall. In response to an approach from the NCB with regard to Cornish exhibiting at the April exhibition Marshall writes to Geoffrey Kirk, Director of Public Relations, stating 'I will be seeing Norman shortly but very much doubt if he will have the works available.'<sup>54</sup> The NCB had requested 10-12 Cornish works in order to provide an 'insider's view' of the industry. In further correspondence between Kirk and Rutter, the Director of Public Relations believes that Marshall's refusal to provide work for the exhibition is based upon historic poor sales. Kirk writes, 'It looks as if we may not get any of Cornish's work in our April exhibition. I expect his gallery were disappointed not to sell any of his pictures last time.'<sup>55</sup> Kirk however then goes on to question 'Has Tom McGuinness been asked yet?'<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Ronald Marshall to Geoffrey Kirk (Director of Public Relations) 21<sup>st</sup> January 1977, TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>55</sup> Note from Geoffrey Kirk to Duncan Rutter 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1977, TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.,

The exchange is interesting as not only does it show Marshall to be exercising a great amount of control over where and when Cornish exhibited but it also demonstrates that whilst there may have been sufficient interest in mining art to warrant the efforts of the NCB in holding exhibitions, this did not extend to sales. Clearly the success that Cornish was experiencing in the local art market with consistent sell out exhibitions at the Stone Gallery was not replicated in the capital.

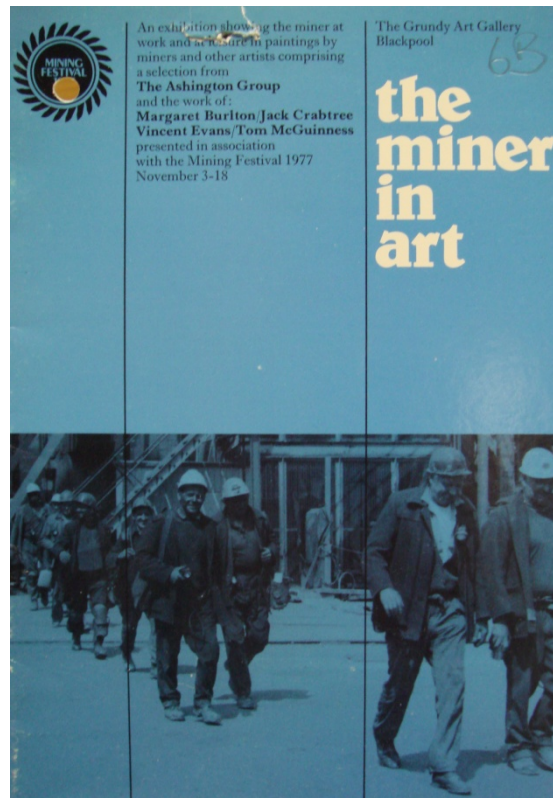


Figure 73  
*The Miner in Art.*  
 Blackpool Mining Festival  
 3rd-18th November 1977.  
 Exhibition programme.

Cornish was not alone in his struggles to sell to a London market. Correspondence, again from NCB records, suggests that Tom McGuinness also experienced difficulties in finding patronage in London's art market.<sup>57</sup> Whilst McGuinness exhibited more frequently in NCB and joint exhibitions, prioritising of the local art scene is still apparent. For example he declines to exhibit at the Berlin exhibition in February 1977 in favour of a Newcastle exhibition. McGuinness did

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Duncan Rutter to Tom McGuinness, 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1977 TNA COAL 30/514.

however exhibit at the *60 years of Mining art exhibition* and again at *The Miner in Art* exhibition held in November 1977 as part of Blackpool's Mining Festival (figure 73 *The Miner in Art* exhibition programme). In these exhibitions he exhibited along with Margaret Burlton, Evans and the Ashington Group. Sales were now of more importance to Cornish and McGuinness as they had by this point left the mining industry and were now reliant upon their art to provide an income.

### **Custodianship of the Ashington Group's art 1975.**

The custodianship of the Ashington Group's art was a significant promotional exercise for the Board and reflected a large degree of commitment to its role as an arts patron.<sup>58</sup> The collection was housed at the NCB's training college Graham House in Benton, Newcastle upon Tyne (figure 74 *Inside Graham House*). *The Northern Echo* applauded the NCB's decision describing the collection as being 'Home at Last'. The article went to say that for the next two months Graham House would be open to the public on Saturdays between the hours of 10 and 5 O'Clock.<sup>59</sup>

The private view was held on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1975 and as with many other regional promotional events, Chaplin's presence was requested (figure 76 *Exhibition catalogue*). Regional NCB heads were anxious to ensure the attendance of the local celebrity as this letter from Geoffrey Kirk to Derek Rutter reveals 'Will you be working out the invitation list? I'd like Sid Chaplin to be there.'<sup>60</sup> Clearly Chaplin's attendance would ultimately increase the profile of the event.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Memo J. Reading to D. Brandrick, Re: The NCB and Art, 8<sup>th</sup> June, 1979, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81 TNA COAL 30/515.

<sup>59</sup> *Northern Echo*, 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1975, newspaper cutting, Art in the Coal Industry TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>60</sup> File note G.Kirk to D. Rutter, Art in the Coal Industry TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>61</sup> By now Chaplin's regional profile as a journalist, novelist and North East personality was well established.





Figure 74  
Inside Graham House.  
Photographs.

The event featured in the 'John North Column' of *The Northern Echo* under the headline of 'Pie, peas and pictures.'<sup>62</sup> The event may have been a celebration of working class mining life. However, the preview event displayed more of a middle class feel. As the article went on to describe, 'The man from the National Coal Board said it was a pie and pint do, so naturally I went. As things turned out, the Coal Board was being a little bit modest. Sure enough there was the odd pint all right, but also gallons of wine (red and white) and not a pie in sight.'<sup>63</sup> The local and national press was flooded with praise for the NCB for their efforts in 'preserving Folk art.'<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1975, newspaper cutting, Art in the Coal Industry TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>64</sup> *Sunderland Echo*, 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1975, newspaper cutting, Art in the Coal Industry TNA COAL 30/514.



Figure 75

Article from the *Evening Chronicle*, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1975.

The *Evening Chronicle* examined the event by focussing on the story of Oliver Kilbourn and the enshrining of the cloth cap (figure 75 Article from the *Evening Chronicle*, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1975). Recognising the role of the NCB, James Dollan commended the permanent housing of the collection 'It seemed a last chance to 'freeze' for posterity some scenes of mining, unknown to the mechanised pitmen of today.' The concept of change features heavily in this article. When commenting on one of his works depicting a club scene, Kilbourn says 'I'm not much of a clubman myself...but I realise the clubs have changed a bit too as well as the pits. They've gone all posh since the women came in, haven't they?' The change in Kilbourn's lifestyle is also apparent. In discussing the impact of being an artist Dollan comments, 'It also affects life for Oliver Kilbourn in a practical way. You and I, if we're looking for a package holiday tour might be swayed by the prospect of day-long sunshine, glorious beeches or just cheap booze. For Oliver Kilbourn and his

wife Margaret, a retired librarian, they are more apt to look for a place with a famous art gallery or an exhibition of some old-master paintings'. The journalist is clearly signalling a shift in the lifestyle of the Kilbourns which is in many ways contradictory. In one sense Kilbourn is seen as reactionary in his attitude to the social club and yet at the same time he is set apart by his passion for art which it is suggested would lead him to holiday in different locations from the rest of the working class.

Undoubtedly there was a huge amount of praise for housing the Group's collection. There was little doubt that the 'Coal Board treasures miners' art.'<sup>65</sup> It is clear, however, that its motivation extended beyond the need for publicity and rested upon a genuine desire to keep the Ashington Group's work together as a collection. The Freeth portraits which had been commissioned by the NCB in 1947 had over the years been separated as a collection with portraits often bequeathed to individuals as gifts. The Board received many requests from retired miners such as Mr. MacDonald for example, who had been the subject of a Freeth portrait when he worked as Under Manager of Pensford Colliery, South West Division.<sup>66</sup>

The breaking up of the Freeth Collection provided the Board with a valuable learning point. In hindsight it seems that the Board regretted its decision to gift works of art to individuals on their retirement. By 1980, W.B Cleaver, Deputy Mining Director made plain his aims regarding the Crabtree collection, 'What I am anxious to do, however, is to keep the collection if not wholly together at least with the minimum of fragmentation, a fate which the Freeth paintings were subject to.'<sup>67</sup> It appears

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<sup>65</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1975, newspaper cutting, Art in the Coal Industry, TNA COAL 30/514.

<sup>66</sup> The gifting of the portraits caused controversy and displayed the NCB's naivety as to the value and importance of the works. In an internal memo from 1973, D.G. James sets out his response to requests from miners to obtain the portraits, 'Despite the precedent set by Sir William Webber, I can see no reason why the Board should give away these paintings, which might appreciate in value over the years.' The memo continues to reveal uncertainty regarding the value of the Freeth commission, James writes 'Jack Reading, who is no devotee of Freeth put a price of £25 on each sketch, whereas Dr. Cheetham thinks they are probably worth £450. Whatever their value, I think we should keep them and offer Mr. MacDonald a photostat copy...' Mr. MacDonald did obtain his portrait and in a letter filed within the archive folder the former miner thanks the NCB and proudly states, 'The picture takes pride of place in my dining room and is greatly admired by my wife and children.' Memo from R. MacDonald to Glover, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1974. TNA COAL 30/574. The reference to Webber indicates that the Freeth collection had already been broken up when the Chairmen had gifted a Freeth portrait in 1967 to Mr. Stobbs, who worked as the Scottish Area NUM official. Memo from D.G James to Secretary, Re: MacDonald Request, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1973, TNA COAL 30/574.

<sup>67</sup> Memo W.B Cleaver to DG Brandrick Re: Crabtree Collection, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1980, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81 TNA COAL 30/515.



Cleaver understood that the potential value and interest in these works rested greatly on the ability to retain them as a collection.

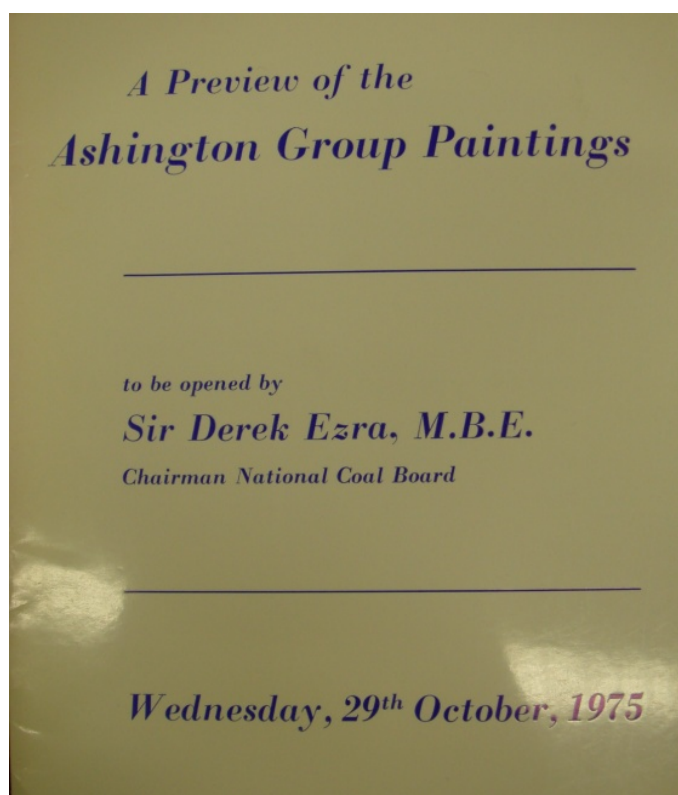


Figure 76

The exhibition catalogue which accompanied the preview of the Ashington Group Paintings. The preview was to be formally opened by Sir Derek Ezra. However the NCB Chairman never made it to the opening as fog grounded his plane at Luton.

The most significant exhibition organised by the NCB took place in 1980. *Coal: British Mining in Art* essentially summarised thirty three years involvement in the art world by presenting the National Coal Board's collection in a touring exhibition. This exhibition was accompanied by a hard back catalogue with commentary by Douglas Gray. In a synopsis of the catalogue text Gray writes, 'The art works themselves mirror the waxing and waning of the industry in the manner of a visual barometer, registering the economic, social and technological peaks and troughs within it.' Philosophically, Gray describes the impact of mining imagery upon the artist, 'The visionary and idealist alike have used it as a source of inspiration, been moved by its social and historical links, and overwhelmed by its

humaneness...Humanity is seen at its most creative and its most vulnerable.’<sup>68</sup> In a self-congratulatory tone the forthcoming exhibition appeared to crystallise the NCB’s long-standing commitment as a patron of the arts, ‘In recent years the Board have developed policies to preserve, and present to the public, where appropriate, a number of aspects of the history of the coal industry, including its archives, artefacts and iconography and indeed, have commissioned a major new history of the industry, to be published in the 1980s.’<sup>69</sup>

Initial problems with the venue suggest that the metropolitan audience may not have been all that interested in the exhibition. Jack Reading was clearly outraged by the snub and vented this frustration in a private memo, ‘Frankly, if no suitable venue can be offered in London, I am moving to the view that we should consider making it a travelling regional exhibition, missing out London altogether, say in Cardiff, Glasgow, and two Midland towns in England.’<sup>70</sup> Despite collating hundreds of years of mining imagery the exhibition failed to include any works by Cornish. The absence of Cornish is interesting especially as documentation reveals that British Coal still possessed at least two Cornish works as late as 1990.<sup>71</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

Norman Cornish’s career benefitted greatly from the NCB’s art policy. For at least thirty years the Board purchased, promoted and exhibited his work. Their support of Cornish enabled him to take a period of extended unpaid leave to complete one of his most important commissions The Durham Gala Mural. Without the support of his employers, it would seem unlikely that Cornish would have accepted the commission such was his continued reluctance to leave the pit. That the NCB guaranteed him a position, once the commission was complete undoubtedly eased the financial pressure Cornish found himself facing. Chaplin’s

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<sup>68</sup> D. Gray, British Mining in Art Exhibition a synopsis prepared for D.G Brandrick, no date, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81 TNA COAL 30/ 515.

<sup>69</sup> Memo D. Brandrick to R.Shaw, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1979, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81, TNA COAL 30/ 515.

<sup>70</sup> Note from J. Reading to R.I Smith, Mining in Art Exhibition, 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1980, Welfare: Art in the Coal Industry, 1977-81, TNA COAL 30/ 515.

<sup>71</sup> The two works in question were to be cleaned, restored and then returned to hang on the fifth floor of Hobart House. Works of Art: Mr Norman Cornish, 1990, Records Management, TNA COAL 30/823.

position firstly as a writer for Coal and secondly as a PRO ensured that Cornish topped the NCB's list when a promotional opportunity arose. The interest of the NCB provided Cornish with the opportunity to travel and experience events beyond the mining community.

By the 1970s tensions between the NCB and the Stone Gallery were clearly emerging following poor sales at London exhibitions. It could be argued that the NCB's interest in his work did more to bolster Cornish's regional reputation than it did in making him a nationally recognised artist. The local press often referred to the patronage afforded by the NCB and utilised this interest to enhance the artist's reputation within the North East. Poor sales from his London shows suggest that whilst the art of the 'pitman painter' may be interesting and educational to the metropolitan's socially conscious, it was not suitable to hang on their walls. For the Marshalls the involvement with the NCB failed to bring tangible benefits by way of sales and explains their reluctance to participate with exhibitions.

Cornish was a useful ambassador to the NCB and his prolonged regional popularity proved in part the benefits of the association. In a region where public relations were consistently hampered by pit closures, the public support of one the North East's most popular artists was certainly a positive exercise on behalf of the NCB.

# Chapter five

## The Durham Gala Mural.



## The Durham Gala Mural 1963.

In 1963 Cornish completed a commission from Durham County Council to produce a canvas mural depicting the Durham Miners' Gala. This chapter examines the commission's significance and importance in context with the wider economic issues within the County. Equally important is the impact of this commission upon the career of Cornish. The Durham Gala Mural was commissioned for the County's newly built administrative centre at Aykley Heads. This building was symbolic in its own right as an impressive piece of architecture which marked the Council's response to the changing economic needs of the area. The commission highlighted the Council's need to emphasise elements of tradition as well as progress within the County. This was especially so when considering a controversial suggestion from the Council to radically change the settlement pattern within the county.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the mining community that Cornish depicted was being threatened by the ideas of modern town planners. Cornish's commission therefore appears all the more contradictory in light of the Council's bold plans for rejuvenation in which the traditional mining community was increasingly marginalised. The following marks the first in depth analysis of the cultural significance of the commission in line with the economic uncertainty which characterised the County at the time. This will be achieved through an examination of regional planning, the process of completing the mural, the significance of its subject matter and then finally through a comparative analysis of contemporaneous depictions of the annual Gala event within Durham.

### **Regional planning.**

Countering industrial decline was a key focus of post-war regional politics and planning. Like other specialised regions whose reliance upon industry had led to mass unemployment, County Durham was faced with huge social and economic uncertainties. The way local and national government dealt with the prospect of

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<sup>1</sup> The County Development Plan of 1951 identified villages and settlements where mining had slowed down or completely ceased. Planners thought it would be unlikely that these areas would be able to attract further industry or that new economic activity could be encouraged.

unprecedented change to the established dynamics of the region was through dramatic forward planning based on predicted patterns of development.<sup>2</sup>

In County Durham the local government response to economic change was illustrated by the proposals of the County Development Plan 1951 and in the creation of new towns such as Peterlee. Whilst the County Plan incorporated radical suggestions which aimed to 'remould' the settlement pattern, the Council understood the importance of maintaining suitable links with the past. For example the decision to build a new town but to name it Peterlee after the celebrated miner and prominent social campaigner Peter Lee (1864-1935), was symbolic of the council's attempt to market regional changes whilst maintaining links with the mining tradition.

The creation of Peterlee new town reveals many of the issues and problems involved in the attempt to 'remould' settlement patterns. The origins of Peterlee were formulated in the influential publication *Farewell Squalor* written by C.W. Clarke and published by Easington District Council in 1946. The work described how County Durham had long suffered from 'Industrial Malnutrition' and the 'cancer' of bad

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<sup>2</sup>The creation of Letchworth Garden City (1903) and Welwyn Garden City (1920) marked the origins of utopian city planning within Britain. Their creation was the inspiration of Ebenezer Howard whose book *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* published in 1902 summarised the aims of the Garden City Association founded in 1898 (subsequently renamed the Town and Country Association). The influence of these ideas was felt during the first half of the twentieth century. However, they were not politically formalised until 1940 with the publication of the Barlow Report which advocated the creation of a central planning ministry to redevelop overcrowded cities. Three further acts cemented the proposals outlined here; the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act, the 1946 New Towns Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. The New Towns Act was the result of a commission by Lewis Silkin the newly appointed Minister of Town and Country Planning who established the Reith Committee to investigate the development of new towns. The significance of the proposals contained here were relevant to County Durham. Reith identified the potential to regroup existing settlements into new towns in which the cultural behaviour of residents could be shaped. The main premise of the 1946 New Towns Act was the desire to create a 'balanced community'. Identical sentiments were expressed in the 1951 plan which endorsed the development of new towns such as Peterlee and New Auckland. It was hoped that these areas could aspire to achieve 'a socially and physically balanced community...' In the case of Peterlee 'It was felt that a fully satisfactory social and cultural life was difficult to achieve in mining villages of the existing size and a New Town of about 30,000 population was a better long-term answer than the continuation of building in each village.' Geenty, W.A. (1951) *County Development Plan 1951 Written Analysis prepared for The County Council of Durham*, Billingham Press Ltd, p.99. Howard, E., (1902) *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd. Hudson, R. *New Towns in North East England. Analysis of 3 new towns in the NE- Peterlee, Washington New Town and Newton Aycliffe*, Volume 1, Part 1, Durham: University of Durham, p.14.

building and planning.<sup>3</sup> Clarke's vision of Peterlee appealed to the wider community. His idea was compelling,

*Let us, therefore, close our eyes on the nineteenth century degradation and squalor, and let us only look with unseeing eyes on the sordid excrescence of the first decade of this century, let us blind ourselves to the septic and ugly building wens and ribbons perpetrated and planted on us between the wars, but let us open our eyes and look brightly forward and onward to the new town, the new living . . . Peterlee.*<sup>4</sup>



Figure 77  
County Hall, Aykley Heads, Durham.  
author's image.

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<sup>3</sup> Clarke, C.W., (December 1946 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *Farewell Squalor- A Design for a New Town and proposals for the Redevelopment of Easington Rural District*, Easington RDC, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,p.87. Clarke was Easington's Rural District Municipal Engineer. Throughout the 1930s the local council had made attempts to improve housing conditions through slum clearance. However, Clarke warned against the continuance of such piecemeal improvements and in his work *Farewell Squalor* proposed the creation of a new town.

For Berthold Lubetkin, Chief Architect at Peterlee the need to combine modernity and tradition was crucial to the success of the new town.<sup>5</sup> Housing design at Peterlee represented a 'theoretical dilemma' which he surmised in a letter to Dr. Felton, PDC Chairmen,

We felt that such an abstract, dematerialised expression would be essentially foreign to the rugged landscape and to the character of the miners themselves, because their lives, interests and surroundings are the very antithesis of that hygienic anonymity which permeates our modern city life in its more sophisticated forms...Would people who are born, spend their lives, and die in the midst of this dramatic, almost Piranesian environment, understand, like, and feel at home in (as distinct from merely recognising) an architecture so directly inspired by that weighty, earthy, rough-hewn, angular environment? Or would it be better to provide as the backdrop of their private lives, a setting of weightless, effortless, and optimistic aesthetic of the future atomic age? <sup>6</sup>

Lubetkin's departure from the Peterlee project in 1950 followed a prolonged dispute with the NCB. Lubetkin's resignation, however, paved the way for the General Manager Vivian Williams to introduce a new form of housing which directly related to the scenic features of the site.<sup>7</sup> This was realised through the selection of the abstract artist Victor Pasmore who Williams hoped would 'contribute to the aesthetics of the Town and help the architects to lift their eyes to a new horizon.'<sup>8</sup> This synthesis of architecture, sculpture and environment envisaged by Pasmore and Williams was realised in the Apollo Pavilion.

For Pasmore, the Pavilion represented an 'architecture and sculpture of purely abstract form through which to walk, in which to linger and on which to play.'

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<sup>5</sup> Lubetkin was a Russian émigré who established his architectural firm Tecton in 1930. His reputation as a 'seminal figure in British architecture' was confirmed through his zoological projects and housing projects in Finsbury and the creation of Highpoint in Highgate. Philipson, G. (1988) *Aycliffe and Peterlee New Towns 1946-1988 Swords into ploughshares and farewell squalor*, Cambridge: University Press, p. 59 and chapters 6 and 9 in Allen, J. (1992) *Berthold Lubetkin: Architecture and the tradition of progress*, London: RIBA publications.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *Berthold Lubetkin*: p.493.

<sup>7</sup> The dispute with the Coal Board surrounded the issue of subsidence, future coal extraction and the nature of the proposed development of the new town. The subsequent debate ended in success for the Coal Board and severely limited Lubetkin's vision of Peterlee which inevitably resulted in his departure from the project. The debate underlined the tension between the need to provide continued employment for residents and the utilisation of land in creating a new town without architectural restrictions. Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee* p.62, Allen, *Lubetkin*, pp.466-467.

<sup>8</sup> Pasmore was currently Master of Painting at King's College, Newcastle. Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee*, p. 101.



He saw the pavilion as an 'anonymous monument' which could 'lift the activity and psychology of an urban housing community on to a universal plane.'<sup>9</sup> The controversy which has always accompanied the structure reflects the tension between modernity and tradition and illustrated the 'theoretical dilemma' which had been identified by Lubetkin. The Apollo Pavilion was a bold structure which epitomised the ambitions of regional planners. However, it was important to remember that this was a city for miners, named in honour of a legendary man in mining history.

In Newcastle a similar but more ostentatious combination of modernity and tradition was occurring. Cruddas Park was 'the star development in T.Dan Smith's plan for a northern Brasilia' and his attempt to 're-shape Britain's strongest local cultural tradition.'<sup>10</sup> The opening of the housing development Cruddas Park in the west end of Newcastle was marked by a week's long programme of festivities in which half a million Tyneside inhabitants participated.<sup>11</sup> The Blaydon Races Centenary Celebration was a carefully planned and staged event, receiving huge press coverage within the local media.<sup>12</sup> Lancaster describes how 'In that week in June 1962 something extraordinary took place. People took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands...To celebrate the centenary of a fictitious proletarian bus ride to a shady unregulated 'flapping track.'<sup>13</sup>

The whole affair demonstrated the importance of combining tradition and progress within regional affairs. Smith appeared to have found a successful combination of continuity and change, 'He called Newcastle 'the Athens of the north-east' and that went down a treat, even though some felt his penchant for tower-block development was less than classically correct.'<sup>14</sup> The courting and manipulation of

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<sup>9</sup> Pasmore quoted in Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee* p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Lancaster, B. 'Sociability and the City' in Colls and Lancaster, *Newcastle upon a Tyne*, p 319.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>12</sup> 'Newcastle and Blaydon Centenary, Festival Week Programme', *Evening Chronicle*, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1962. The official festival week programme for the Newcastle and Blaydon Centenary featured the tower blocks of Cruddas Park as the cover image.

<sup>13</sup> Lancaster, 'Sociability and the City' p.320.

<sup>14</sup> Obituary: T. Dan Smith in *The Independent*, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1993.

publicity that Smith had proved so adept at was crucial to the success of the centenary celebrations.<sup>15</sup> As Lancaster confirms,

He knew all too well the cultural significance of this west Newcastle site. Scotswood Road was renowned for its numerous pubs, for terraced streets that climbed steeply from its northern side, for Armstrong's factory, long the city's largest employer, and above all for its arterial road in the Tyneside anthem *The Blaydon Races*.<sup>16</sup>

Post-war planning within the region primarily concerned itself with the need to stimulate economic growth. Distressed areas, development districts or special development areas, have been many of the various official titles used with reference to the North East. Whilst the description may have varied over the years the economic position of the North East altered little. As Colls neatly summarises, 'The peripheries had once stood for strength. Now they waited for relief.'<sup>17</sup> The findings of reports such as Pepler and Macfarlane's predicted a vast reduction in mining jobs in the forthcoming decades.<sup>18</sup> The reality of decline prompted radical intervention to ensure the North East's development could cope with the demands of modern industry. The notion of a 'typical' pit village was discussed in chapter two. The accounts used in that chapter depicted the mining village as developing rapidly around the pit and as a result housing and amenities being quickly but often poorly constructed. Significantly, the cultural development of these communities was perceived to be based upon a collective consciousness.

It would seem that the traditional development of the mining community no longer appeared beneficial or desirable to planners and in some cases the residents themselves.<sup>19</sup> Culturally the planners acknowledged that mining communities were often being eclipsed by the wealth of social activities being offered by larger, more

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly Smith's PR firm was hired as the industrial and press relations consultants for PDC. The contract was terminated when Smith became the Chairmen of both Aycliffe and Peterlee Development Corporations from July 1968-February 1970. Philips, *Aycliffe and Peterlee*, pp.168-169.

<sup>16</sup> Lancaster, 'Sociability and the city,' p.319-320.

<sup>17</sup> Colls, R. (2002) *Identity of England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press p.322.

<sup>18</sup> The Plan for the North-East Development Area was prepared by consultants George Pepler and P.W. Macfarlane at the request of the local planning authorities. The function of the report was to assist in the preparation of development plans such as that produced by William Geenty in relation to County Durham. The Pepler and Macfarlane Plan predicted a reduction of 23,500 jobs in mining within the County over the next 25-30 years. Gary Pattison, *Restructuring Culture*, p.3.

<sup>19</sup> The proposal to create Peterlee had stemmed from the request of community members. A deputation of miners put the request to Lewis Silkin, Labour's Minister of Town and Country Planning and in 1948 the Peterlee Development Corporation was established. Allen, *Lubetkin*, p. 452.

prosperous towns. However, they maintained that it was the miners themselves who were finding their surroundings inadequate:

The truth is that we have been, and are, living in a crisis, not only in the mining industry, but in the entire life of the coalfield. The old home-made and simple social facilities of the villages were in step with the modest needs of the residents, but the tempo of life has changed, and many of the villages are now too small to compete with the towns in providing the sophisticated, ready-made amusements which are now increasingly demanded.<sup>20</sup>

The Council's answer to the deepening economic crisis was the 1951 County Development Plan. The plan considered the problems caused by specialisation, the implications of state intervention and the need to improve the visual appearance of the County, all of which had been covered in previous reports and were to be reiterated in countless more that were to follow.<sup>21</sup> Proposals to develop new towns in the region also mirrored a pattern of development across the country in which the creation of new towns was advocated within bomb damaged cities or in areas where social improvement was desirable. What made the 1951 County Plan unique, however, was the challenge it posed to the mining community. Albeit industrial decline was a reality within many of these areas, the decisions outlined in the plan ultimately dictated the future of certain communities and the residential choices of the inhabitants.

The proposals within the plan were to have dramatic social and cultural implications. The Durham mining community that Cornish represented was brought under scrutiny and the conclusions drawn were far from positive. The foreword to the plan is bleak, 'Looking at our own County of Durham, and the other great industrial areas of the Country as a whole, we are confronted too often with squalid reminders of the consequences of sporadic and uncontrolled development.'<sup>22</sup> What made the plan so controversial was the paragraph relating to settlements categorised as D:

Those from which a considerable loss of population may be expected. In these cases it is felt that there should be no further investment of capital on any considerable scale, and that any proposal to invest capital should be carefully examined. This

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<sup>20</sup> W.A Geenty, 'County Development Plan' p.117.

<sup>21</sup> Wallace, E. (1934) 'Reports of the Investigations into Industrial Conditions in certain Depressed Areas' London:HMSO Cmd 4728.

<sup>22</sup> Foreword by J.W Foster to the County Development Plan, 1951.

generally means that when the existing houses become uninhabitable they should be replaced elsewhere, and that any expenditure on facilities and services in these communities which would involve public money should be limited to conform to what appears to be the possible future life of existing property in the community.<sup>23</sup>

The plan criticised the visual appearance of the typical Durham mining village. It was described as 'scarred and scratched,' where 'the pit-head, the waste heap and the factory chimney all too often completely dominate the scene.'<sup>24</sup> In a further quote from the report, G. W. Gelson the County Architect parodies the familiar description of the mining village as he writes,

The new villages and towns were built around the pit-heads, often on the hill tops where the upper seams outcropped or came near the surface, were dreary, soulless places. They consisted long, parallel, monotonous rows often with unmade streets, primitive sanitation and there was an almost complete lack of social facilities. They were built as quickly and as cheaply as possible, and as close to the mine as possible.<sup>25</sup>

The ideas proposed in the Plan were supported by the publication of promotional material. Advertising industrial opportunity in the County, a joint publication produced by Durham Council and the Industrial Bureau argued that labour relations in the North were better than many other places in the Country. The leaflet also attempted to counter some of the negative perceptions of the area,

To many people Durham means pit heaps, ugly villages and poor social facilities, but this is totally the wrong impression. More than half the County is still rural, untouched by industry and with great natural beauty...The county is not totally dominated by coalmines, and many of the towns and villages have attractive hilly surroundings...The County Council has adopted a policy of regrouping population into convenient and attractive centres throughout the County. In this way the pattern of settlements is being reshaped to provide labour sources for new industrial growth and the ugly and badly sited mining villages and industrial housing are slowly disappearing...Many of the industrial scars are being removed.<sup>26</sup>

William Geenty, Durham's Local Planning Officer aimed to limit the obvious outcry to the changes contained in the report by claiming that 'There is no proposal to demolish any village, nor is there a policy against genuine village life. It is proposed to remould gradually the pattern of development in the interests of the

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<sup>23</sup> G.W. Gelson quoted in the County Development Plan, 1951, pp. 77-78.

<sup>24</sup> Geenty, County Development Plan, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>26</sup> Durham County Council and Industrial Bureau (1957) *Industrial Opportunity In Durham*, p5, 15.

county as a whole.<sup>27</sup> Yet within this remoulding he made plain that 'Many of the rows of houses which grew up around the pit-heads have outlived their usefulness.'<sup>28</sup> Emotional attachment to a place and the associated community spirit were not factors which should stand in the way of economic and social progress, 'Indeed the very reason for the existence of some of these small isolated places will disappear completely...It is the only wise policy to pursue, and it is most important that the cold facts should not be ignored for sentimental or parochial reasons.'<sup>29</sup> The opposition to the proposals is acknowledged but dismissed as short sighted, '...tradition dies hard, and, in many cases, there is still some reluctance to break with the past.'<sup>30</sup>

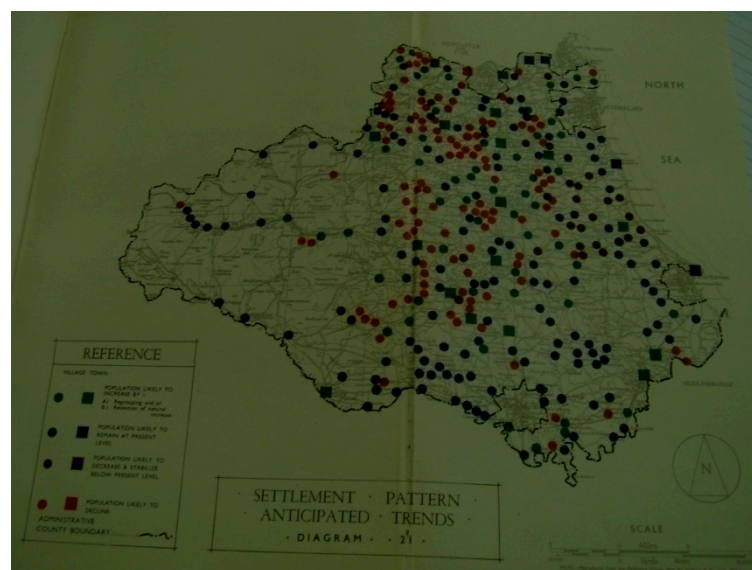


Figure 78

Photograph of a map included in the County Development Plan. The red dots indicate the villages that were characterised as Category D.

Source: author's image.

The frequency of the red dots representing D villages scattered across Geenty's map demonstrates the scale and complexity of the problem (figure 78 *photograph of map included in the County Development Plan*). Of the 350 settlements which were included in the Plan, 114 settlements were categorised as D villages.<sup>31</sup> This figure was later revised to 121.<sup>32</sup> By 1969, three villages had been

<sup>27</sup> Geenty, County Development Plan, p.78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>31</sup> For a definition of the categories and a list of categorised settlements see Appendix II.

<sup>32</sup> Atkinson, J.R. (1964) *County Development Plan Amendment 1964: written analysis prepared for the County Council of Durham by J.R. Atkinson, County Planning Officer*, Durham: County Council.

completely demolished whilst many others were part-demolished. The impact of the plan upon residents was vividly recollected recently in the BBC Radio 4 broadcast *Planning for Destruction: the D villages of County Durham*.<sup>33</sup> The programme brought together the voices of former D village residents who reminisced over what their community meant to them. Their nostalgic defiance also filtered into recent publications. McManners and Wales write, '...human relationships are far stronger than bricks and mortar. The villagers were scattered but the fierce community spirit they'd always enjoyed refused to die.'<sup>34</sup> The programme also features extracts from a 1964 BBC Home Service broadcast called *The Dying Village*. These extracts were emotionally moving as residents of the 'murdered' villages expressed their betrayal and bitterness towards the Labour government that they had so staunchly supported. They brought the implication of the plan into perspective and vividly illustrated the 'calculated destruction' of parts of the region.<sup>35</sup>

In a separate extract taken from a 1969 programme called *A Long Time Dying*, the region's Chief Planner Richard Aitkinson was asked to explain his decisions to Tyne Tees Television viewers. Interviewed by Peter Williams, Aitkinson played down the impact of the proposal arguing that it was a case of 'perspective' and in reality only ten percent of Durham's 850,000 population would be affected. Williams is quick to translate this, responding that it may only be 10 percent of the population but that actually equates to 85,000 people.<sup>36</sup> Aitkinson's obvious frustration is shown during this interview. He could see no reason for the continued objections to the plan and this divide illustrated the growing tension between regional planners and residents.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 'Planning for Destruction: the D-villages of County Durham' BBC Radio 4, 20:00 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2008.

<sup>34</sup> McManners, and Wales, *Tom McGuinness*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Dying Village' BBC Home Service, 1964 extract contained in 'Planning for Destruction: the D-villages of County Durham' BBC Radio 4.

<sup>36</sup> Further details relating to the programme synopsis for 'A Long Time Dying' produced by Thames Television 1969, were obtained from the BFI database. <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/408140>

<sup>37</sup> The opposition to the destruction of villages came to a head in 1960 at the Public Inquiry into the plan. Inhabitants of 'D' villagers living in the vicinity of the new town development overwhelmingly objected to moving to Peterlee. Their objections were based upon local attachment, their proximity to the pit and the refusal to pay higher rents for houses in Peterlee. Such was the animosity of South Hetton residents that the *Sunderland Echo* reported how Clarke's *Farewell Squalor*, the blueprint for Peterlee, was more commonly referred to as *Mein Kampf*. The outcome of the inquiry was to favour the residents but it would appear that the Development Corporation was equally happy at the reduction in numbers of slum clearance families to be housed at Peterlee. *Sunderland Echo*, 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1960 in Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee*, p.90.

Geenty talked of the need to 'remould' the settlement pattern but that also involved vast changes to the cultural behaviour of residents. As the BBC Radio 4 broadcast suggested, the changes to the settlement pattern dictated that people would have to think and behave differently and, most importantly, learn to aspire differently. The physical destruction of villages was by far the simplest part of the plan. The actual imposition of culture would prove more difficult.

The adverse public response to the proposal was a factor which Geenty himself was forced to consider. His suggestion of a promotional film showing the 'positive policy towards planning' which the Council was adopting was rejected by the County Council Planning Committee quite possibly due to the cost of production.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Geenty continued to warn against the detrimental psychological effects of delaying the implementation and completion of the proposed re-housing. His suggestion that trees be planted to hide the by-products of re-housing such as the 'heaps of rubble, deserted streets and single buildings left standing' was one which received support from the NCB. The Coal Board also offered to reduce the height of conical tips in order to make them 'less objectionable and less conspicuous in the landscape.'<sup>39</sup>

The County Development Plan did not adversely affect Spennymoor as it did other Durham communities. For Spennymoor leaders and residents, the proposal to build a new town in Aycliffe was more concerning. The fear of losing workers and potential investment to the new town was a genuine concern.<sup>40</sup> The reaction demonstrated the difficulties faced by regional planners whose attempts to improve one area were almost inevitably to the detriment of another.

Fortunately for Cornish, Spennymoor had been categorised as an 'A' town and the plan concluded that 'this community may gain in population because of a

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<sup>38</sup> Durham County Council Planning Committee, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1957, DRO CCA57/1/10. The cost of producing such a promotional film was estimated at £6000 for a twenty minute black and white film and £10,000 for a colour film. Letter from K. Lockhart Smith of The Film Producers Guild to W.A Geenty, 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1957, DRO CCA57/1/10.

<sup>39</sup> Durham County Council Planning Committee, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1957, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1957 DRO CCA57/1/10.

<sup>40</sup> Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee* p.162.

regrouping from the surrounding area.<sup>41</sup> The town's capacity to attract light engineering and manufacturing firms was confirmed in the subsequent years. The site of the former Second World War ordinance factory at Merrington attracted various international companies such as Siemens, Electrolux and Black and Decker who opened their factory in 1965. In 1979 Smart & Brown Bro. Engineers were taken over by the Swedish company Thorn Lighting and the company is still in existence today supplying 4.7 million light fittings to over 100 commercial markets.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of housing, extensive slum clearance had already been underway in Spennymoor for several years. From 1930-1939, 407 houses had been demolished impacting upon 1,147 residents.<sup>43</sup> Cornish's previous home at Catherine Street, along with Duncombe Street, Villiers Street, Old George Street and Queen Street were amongst the properties demolished. Economic investment within the town was acknowledged by the building of Bessemer Park in 1968-9 which created 1009 new homes. The official Spennymoor Town Council Guide of 1979 reflects upon the changing landscape of the town,

An emigrant from Spennymoor returning home after an absence of 30 years or so would see many changes...The public houses, the Albert, the Queen's Head, the Lord Raglan, and Red Lion are now only a memory. On this site the returned emigrant would see the new shopping centre with the pedestrian precinct where shoppers meet and talk in safety and sit in the sun (weather permitting).<sup>44</sup>

To some extent the planning and development necessary to counter the decline of traditional heavy industry added an element of nostalgia to the reception of Cornish's work. The belief that Cornish was preserving something that would soon be lost forever was obviously a significant factor in his popularity. As early as 1964, *The Northern Echo* reported how Councillor William Mason believed that paintings by the local artist Norman Cornish should be in the council's possession both for artistic and historical reasons, 'The old Spennymoor was disappearing-"three

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<sup>41</sup> Geenty, *County Development Plan*, p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> Factory of the Year Awards 2009.

[http://home.worldinteriordesignnetwork.com/news/factory\\_carpet\\_from\\_shaw\\_wins\\_best\\_of\\_year\\_2009\\_award\\_091230/](http://home.worldinteriordesignnetwork.com/news/factory_carpet_from_shaw_wins_best_of_year_2009_award_091230/)

<sup>43</sup> Geenty, *County Development Plan*, p.104.

<sup>44</sup> Spennymoor Town Council, (1979) *Spennymoor Town Council Official Guide*, London: J.Burrows & Co Ltd. p. 11.



cheers”-but paintings of the town as it used to be would be worth having.’<sup>45</sup> The wider implications of regional change and development may have been responsible for an increased awareness in Cornish’s work. The commissioning of the mural in order to decorate the newly built County Hall, demonstrates an obvious need by councillors to combine elements of tradition within the changing landscape of modernisation.

### **The commission.**

In 1962 Cornish was commissioned by Durham County Council to produce a mural depicting the Durham Gala celebrations. The mural was to hang in the newly built County Hall at Aykley Heads, Durham (figure 77 *County Hall, Aykley Heads, Durham*). In Cornish’s autobiography he describes the process of the commission and its successful completion in 1963. The following section will draw on this account to trace the process of the commission, before considering how Cornish portrayed the Gala and the overall significance of the mural.



Figure 79

Cornish photographed in front of the mural following the opening of County Hall in 1963.

An examination of Council records suggests that much planning and discussion took place in relation to the art work that would be housed at County Hall. The proposal to commission art work in the form of murals appears to have

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<sup>45</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1964.

originated from the County Architect G.W. Gelson. He is recorded in the minutes of the management sub-committee meeting, describing what he believed the two murals should depict.

one be a historic mural to portray in a series of symbols and figures the early stages of the building of Durham Cathedral. The mural to the east end of the reception should depict the scene at the Durham Miners' Gala. The murals could be painted in oils on canvas by local artists who are well known. I suggest that T.W. Pattison of Newcastle-on-Tyne carry out the mural of the building of Durham Cathedral and Mr. J. Cornish of Spennymoor carry out the mural of the Miners' Gala.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the obvious error in relation to Cornish's name it would be fair to assume that the artist's regional reputation was sufficient for his work to be widely known and an immediate choice for the County Architect. In his autobiography Cornish claims himself to have decided on the subject matter for the mural. This is in contrast to the records of the County Hall management Sub-Committee which clearly reveal that the subject matter as well as the medium had already been decided prior to approaching Cornish.<sup>47</sup> Despite the origins of the subject matter, Cornish envisaged his Gala Mural as 'a great sea of people on the field at Durham.'<sup>48</sup>

The type of work which was commissioned for the new premises focused upon aspects of traditional folklore, key historical buildings and the region's more recent mining heritage as symbolised in the Durham Gala. These works would take central positions within the building and would be impressive pieces if only on account of their size. Cornish's finished mural was to span some thirty feet (figure 79 Cornish photographed in front of the mural following the opening of County Hall in 1963).

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<sup>46</sup> William Gelson suggested that the Sub-Committee consider the inclusion of a piece of sculpture based upon a family group or a mother and child scene arguing that 'modern material would be desirable.' The financial considerations appeared paramount as Gelson's suggestion for the sculpture shows, 'From the practical and economic view a new technique by welding a metal frame and mesh covering with glass fibre by a bronze or aluminium colour would be satisfactory.' A further suggestion was made that Finance Committee should enquire about the possibility of obtaining a piece by Henry Moore. County Architects Report to County Hall management Sub-Committee 22 October 1962, County Hall Management Sub-Committee Volume I 28 September 1960-14 February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11. Finance Committee 15<sup>th</sup> July 1963, County Hall Management Sub-Committee Volume I 28 September 1960-14 February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11. County Architects Report to the County Hall Sub-Committee 16<sup>th</sup> July 1962, County Hall Management Sub-Committee Volume I 28 September 1960-14 February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11.

<sup>47</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life* p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

There was also a proposal to commission a third mural which incorporated local folklore, and traditional tales including the Lambton Worm, the Picktree Brag, Sir John Duck and the Raven and Bonnie Bobby Shaftoe (figure 80 *Mosaic Panel* below).<sup>49</sup> It was clearly hoped that the themes included within all three murals would illustrate key institutions and traditions from within the region. Not only would these themes strike a chord with regional audiences but they would provide a reflection of the cultural heritage for visitors from beyond the County. The subject matter of the murals incorporated innocuous retrospective themes produced by artists whose regional reputation was proven.



Figure 80  
Mosaic Panel at Aykley Heads.

That Cornish was an immediate choice to produce the work suggests that his regional reputation was firmly established following his initial Stone Gallery exhibitions and through his extensive exposure in the local media. Cornish's agent Ronald Marshall had noted a lack of interest from the Council in the work of the artist. Following on from Cornish's 1960 Stone Gallery exhibition Marshall wrote to William Farrell, to update the warden at Spennymoor on his former protégé's current success. The letter is extremely critical of Durham County Council who as of that time had not formally demonstrated their support of the local artist by purchasing some of his work. Marshall writes,

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<sup>49</sup> County Architects Report to the County Hall Sub-Committee 18<sup>th</sup> October 1961, County Hall Management Sub-Committee, Volume I, 28 September 1960-14 February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11.

There is perhaps one more point that will interest you before I close my letter. Durham County Council have still not bought a Cornish. Curry, I think you know him, the deputy Director was at the Private View and made a great deal of noise saying that his Curator of Bowes Museum and staff must come in right away and get some Cornish.<sup>50</sup>

The disappointment at the Council's lack of support leaves Marshall to conclude 'I am afraid Durham County Council has not changed a great deal since you were here'.<sup>51</sup> Clearly there was a growing expectation that the Council would demonstrate their support through the purchase of work and the commissioning of the mural could be interpreted as a result of mounting pressure to acknowledge the work of Cornish and support local talent within the region.

When interest was shown by the Council, Cornish was initially reluctant to accept the commission. Despite the obvious financial and career benefits, he was anxious about the actual size of the work. The mural itself was much larger than any of the domestic size paintings that he produced in his home. Furthermore, Cornish believed that it would be challenging to work as a full-time miner whilst meeting the deadlines imposed by the Council. Yet despite his reservations Cornish accepted the commission largely due to the persuasion of his Stone Gallery agents. However, the immensity of the task remained daunting.<sup>52</sup>

Cornish was paid £1000 for the commission but in order to complete the mural he took unpaid leave from the pit. An initial £250 was paid upon signing the contract with £15 a week thereafter with the balance of £250 paid when the mural was installed.<sup>53</sup> In contrast T.W. Pattison was to receive a fee of £750 for his smaller mural.<sup>54</sup> The difference in fee is evidence of the confirmed popularity and demand

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<sup>50</sup> Letter from Ronald Marshall to William Farrell, 11 July 1960 DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>52</sup> He writes in his autobiography, 'Sometimes, as I walked in by to my work, I would stop momentarily near a white-washed, brick wall which was almost similar in size to the proposed mural. I would imagine it as the canvas and I would think 'blimey, how am I to cover all that with paint?' Further in by, I would relate the lengths of pipes or rails to the picture size. My feelings then were a mixture of anxiety and obsession'. Cornish, *A Slice of life*, p.47

<sup>53</sup> Finance Committee 13<sup>th</sup> December 1962, County Hall Management Sub-Committee Volume I 28<sup>th</sup> September 1960-14<sup>th</sup> February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11.

<sup>54</sup> Finance Committee 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1962, County Hall Management Sub-Committee Volume I 28<sup>th</sup> September 1960-14<sup>th</sup> February 1964, DRO CCA68/1/11.

placed upon Cornish.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, an earlier exchange many years previously hints at tensions between the established Pattison and the then up and coming young Cornish; Pattison warned Cornish there was no money in professional art. He then asked rhetorically how Cornish would feel if he were to hew [Cornish's] his coal? <sup>56</sup> Pattison's reaction to the difference in the fees paid for the respective commissions can therefore only be imagined (figure 81 *T.W. Pattison's Mural*).

On accepting the commission Cornish was immediately faced with logistical issues. To begin with a canvas of the correct size had to be sourced. Eventually the canvas was purchased from a London dealer and sent to the artist's Spennymoor home.<sup>57</sup> The practicality of producing the enormous mural meant that Cornish was forced to use a local church hall as his studio. In preparation for painting the mural, he completed a smaller practice version. This smaller version stretched from his bedroom window to the top of the stairs. He describes having to climb under the painting in order to go to bed.<sup>58</sup>



Figure 81  
T.W. Pattison's Mural at Aykley Heads.

<sup>55</sup> In 1965 the *Daily Express* reported upon Cornish's current exhibition at the Stone Gallery and how some of his work was priced as high as 120 guineas. The reporter stated that the security of his £14 a week pit job along with free coal and a colliery cottage convinced Cornish to remain working in the mine. Interestingly, Cornish was probably earning slightly more each week painting the commission that he was working as a miner. *Daily Express*, 29 November, 1965.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, January 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of life* p.49.

<sup>58</sup> There is no doubt that the practice mural completely took over the physical space within the home but also became the family's priority, 'The dressing table was flecked with paint and the smell of turps and oil was evident. My wife had a lot to put up with at the time. I remember some ideas for the design, rapidly sketched out on newspaper, being accidentally sent off to the fish shop. Sarah had to rush off and rescue them'. *Ibid.*, p. 49

In *A Slice of Life* Cornish reveals that the commission was resented by many of his fellow miners. The ongoing pit closures within County Durham meant that miners were frequently being transferred to different pits and many were being made redundant. Whilst on leave to paint the mural Cornish was called to a redundancy committee. Whilst the artist was told that work would be found for him on his return, his colleagues in the local miners' union believed Cornish was on full pay while he painted the mural. As he had a job as an artist, they felt he should be placed first on the redundancy list. The bitterness towards this situation was expressed by Cornish, 'I was painting about miners' solidarity, brotherhood and without weekly pay. You can imagine my thoughts at the time.'<sup>59</sup> In part their reaction may hint at a wider cynicism with regard to the Council's motivation behind the mural commission. Their direct experience of industrial decline was in contrast to the Council's projected image of progress and modernity.

The attitude displayed by his colleagues is interesting when compared to the hostility from established artists such as Pattison. Tilly Marshall claims that a similar exchange occurred between Lowry and Cornish. She claims that the Salford artist saw Cornish as an artistic rival.<sup>60</sup> The conflict between mining and art often left Cornish alienated from both worlds. Whilst his status as a miner made him an authority on the mining scene, the fact that he continued in full time employment prevented his move into professional art. The problem of maintaining the dual role was undoubtedly exacerbated by the media attention and their interest in the 'pitman painter.' The moniker itself neatly surmised the conflict in which pit and paint were firmly juxtaposed. This sense of isolation appears as a strong theme within Cornish's recollections of this time. The irony of his position was apparent to Cornish. The mural was intended to reflect the spirit of the mining community, of mutual support and shared outlook and yet throughout the period Cornish felt dislocated from the people and the scene he depicted.

Media interest in the commission proved to be a problem for Cornish. The Council had insisted that the mural could not be photographed prior to the unveiling ceremony. Local newspaper reporters who by now had taken for granted

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 51

<sup>60</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, pp 39-40.

accessibility to the artist, were thus frustrated when they were turned away. As a result, articles on the mural were published carrying headlines such as 'The Hush Hush murals of Durham.'<sup>61</sup> Cornish expressed unease about having to turn reporters away mindful as he was of their importance to his career. However, the completion of the mural was an important milestone in Cornish's career. It provided an opportunity for him to experience life as a full time artist. As a *Daily Mail* reporter pointed out this was 'probably the first time he has ever painted a picture outside of the bedroom of his stone built colliery house.'<sup>62</sup>

Cornish's decision to leave the mining industry three years after completing the mural came in 1966 when he was aged 47. The extent to which the mural commission lay behind his resignation is unclear. Before leaving to carry out the commission, Cornish had been transferred to a drift mine.<sup>63</sup> He described this new mine as being like 'Passchendaele'; it was a 'front line posting' in which he spent his days in a 'sea of mud'.<sup>64</sup> In addition, the hostility of his new colleagues and their lack of understanding towards his art affected Cornish negatively. This change did have a noticeable effect on the art Cornish produced. Indeed, disenchantment with his work as a miner had been noted by the critics as early as 1962. Discussing Cornish's Stone Gallery exhibition, *The Northern Echo* correspondent commented, 'Oddly enough there are none of the claustrophobic studies of his fellow miners digging for coal. This is an above the surface world of telegraph poles receding in perspective, of wet streets, and of the ubiquitous pit road.'<sup>65</sup>

The move away from underground scenes continued over the subsequent years and perceptive critics noticed the emotional change in Cornish's motivation and outlook. *The Northern Echo* correspondent makes reference to Cornish having

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<sup>61</sup> This was the headline used in *The Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1963.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Mail*, 6th November, 1962.

<sup>63</sup> Cornish was relieved to have been sent to Tudhoe Mill Drift on his return from leave. He describes being made to feel welcome due to the fact that he had previously designed a banner for them. Before he left to paint the mural he had been transferred from the Dean and Chapter Colliery which eventually closed in 1966. The transfer of miners to productive pits was part of the NCB's attempt to reduce the impact of mine closure on small communities. Cornish, *A Slice of Life* p.51, 63. White, *Portrait of County Durham*, p. 166.

<sup>64</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1966.

<sup>65</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1962.



made the 'break [from mining] -in a slightly different way.'<sup>66</sup> He explains how 'it is at once noticeable that the present exhibition contains but one sketch of miners in the cage and none of them in the workings.' The street scenes represent a 'marked new departure' in which Cornish's use of felt pen outlines the structure of the Spennymoor houses. If it is miners underground that the audience wants to see then the critic advises visitors go to the McGuinness exhibition which was currently showing at the City Hotel.<sup>67</sup> It was clear that by 1966 the pit was no longer a source of inspiration to Cornish. The way in which the mine had characterised Cornish's earlier work was now absent. However, elements of his interest in the subject matter remained.

The finished mural was unveiled when County Hall was officially opened by HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, on October 14<sup>th</sup> 1963. The painting spanning 30 feet, still hangs in its original location above the entrance in the Staircase Hall at Aykley Heads. The finished work was well received and Cornish notes that whilst many officials had remained distant in the months preceding its completion, when the final work was unveiled the congratulations flooded in. The mural was described in the press as a 'rugged pitman's-eye-view of *The Big Meeting*.'<sup>68</sup>



Figure 82  
Norman Cornish.  
*The Big Meeting* 1963  
oil on canvas

<sup>66</sup> *Northern Echo*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>67</sup> *Northern Echo*, 2<sup>st</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>68</sup> *The Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1963.



## Mural Art.

The decision to commission art work for the newly built administrative centre was not in itself spectacular. However, the Council's decision to commission specific types of art work and in particular the three murals is of more interest. Frustratingly the Council minutes do not reveal the inspiration behind the mural idea but the choice reflects a deeper understanding of the artistic importance of murals and their use as 'public art'. In the execution of the mural Cornish demonstrates an innate awareness of standard mural conventions. The significance of commissioning art in the form of a mural will now be considered.

'Mural painting, whether in prehistoric caves, Italian Renaissance Churches, or 'New Deal' American post offices and schools, has traditionally fulfilled diverse and powerfully symbolic purposes -ritual, religious, social, political, psychological, commemorative or commercial, to name but few.'<sup>69</sup> What makes murals such a symbolic art form is their ability to present to a large audience a topical issue and in doing so, evoke and stimulate wide-scale public response. Murals are art imbued with a greater purpose; the very nature of their usually public location dictates that they are 'public art' intended for a wide audience.<sup>70</sup>

That the Council decided to commission three murals for its new building suggests a wider knowledge of the historic uses and symbolic content of mural painting. The didactic themes which had been selected to feature in the murals reflected the need to foster a sense of pride and reaffirm aspects of local tradition. Greta Berman argues that a mural should complement the building 'adding a meaningful statement to the structure of the building.'<sup>71</sup> In the case of Aykley Heads it could be argued that the historic narrative contained within the murals represents the chronological progress of the County through key cultural events. The historic content of the three murals provides a link between the past and the future which is

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<sup>69</sup> Willsden, C. (2000) *Mural Painting in Britain 1840-1940, Image and Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, preface.

<sup>70</sup> Willsden, p. 3 and Lee, A, (1999) *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, radical politics and San Francisco's public murals*, London: University of California Press, p.1.

<sup>71</sup> Berman, G. (1978) *The Lost Years: mural painting in new York under the WPA federal art project 1935-1943*, New York: Garland Publisher, p. 31.

represented by Aykley Heads. The modern and impressive building is the County's vision of an effective centralised local government and in this sense Aykley Heads completes the story of progress that is represented by the murals.

The modern development of the mural in Europe, America and Mexico was influenced by a growing sense of national identity in which the government, industry, and sometimes rich private individuals became the main patrons of commissions.<sup>72</sup> The secularisation of society also signalled the secularisation of mural painting. As a result traditional religious content of murals was marginalised reflecting the change in patronage and the purpose to which murals were painted. In interwar America, mural art was central to the scheme devised by the Federal Government in order to assist the unemployed and poverty stricken artists affected by the Great Depression.<sup>73</sup>

The mural renaissance under the New Deal government strongly reflected public taste. The choice of topics represented in the post office murals is the basis for Karol Ann Marling's study *Wall-to-Wall America*. In this work she argues that the content of the murals was intended to allay the fears of the general public by presenting the current economic crisis as part of a 'visual continuum that covertly promised hope for the future.'<sup>74</sup> Government funded mural projects were heavily supervised and topics which were deemed unsuitable to public taste were duly removed.<sup>75</sup> Marling notes how while a distinctly regional vision developed within the murals, a universal message developed across 'Mural America' which showed to the people the 'mighty dream that always came true.'<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> 'Mural painting,' Grove Dictionary of Art p. 328. Bank Downs, L. (1999) *Diego Rivera : the Detroit Industry murals*, Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, p. 21. Berman, *The Lost years*, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Under Roosevelt's New Deal the Works Progress Administration was established and incorporated within this was the Federal Art Project which commissioned the painting of murals in schools, hospitals, prisons and post offices.

<sup>74</sup> Marling, K., (1982) *Wall to wall America a cultural history of post office murals in the great Depression*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, p.9

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.3. Painting the image onto canvas as opposed to using traditional fresco techniques affected the permanence of the image. The benefit of this being that the canvas could easily be taken down and removed if it was no longer suitable. Berman discusses the significance of painting murals onto canvas as opposed to wall paintings done in fresco buono, fresco secco, encaustic or some other medium direct onto the wall. She argues that the increase in materials used within murals also complicates the definition of a mural. Pasmore's murals commissioned for Newcastle's Civic Centre were in the medium of glass. She maintains that the very 'social' nature of a work in part helps to solve the issue of definition. Berman, *The Lost Years*, p. 30-31.

<sup>76</sup> Marling, *Wall to wall*, p.326.

Anthony Lee's analysis of San Francisco mural art argues that apart from those commissioned as part of the WPA scheme, there were several different versions of 'public art' often containing a politically critical and controversial message.<sup>77</sup> He highlights the Coit Tower controversy in which the muralists incorporated leftist ideas within their work in protest at the destruction of Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* which included an image of Lenin. The event led Lee to conclude that the Coit Tower controversy represented a genuine opportunity for the Communist Party to transform 'public painting into a vehicle for agitation.'<sup>78</sup> The potential of the mural to inform, stimulate and influence the general public is clearly highlighted by the events that occurred during the interwar years within America. Personal political interest or ambition was not a motivating feature for Cornish, this made him an ideal choice for Durham County Council.

In Britain, the political power of mural art was demonstrated in the 1930s by the Artists International Association. Links to Rivera and the Mexican Mural Movement were established through AIA artists such as Viscount (Jack) Hastings and Clifford Wright who had had worked as assistants to the artist on the 1933 World Fair murals in Chicago. Tisa Hess's stay in Spennymoor brought a direct link between the work of AIA artists and the Settlement. Cornish however, was personally involved with the AIA in 1950 through the *Coalminers* exhibition and again in 1952 when he exhibited at *The Mirror and the Square* exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries. The experience of staying in London at the time of the *Coalminers* exhibition undoubtedly influenced Cornish as he was brought into contact with the work of many European artists associated with the AIA. Whilst direct influence is not noted this wider education was particularly useful for Cornish, who has always demonstrated an acute interest in the history of art and particular artistic movements.

The potential of mural painting to foster a sense of identity was illustrated vividly in Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals. In a less overt manner, the strengthening of local identity was clearly a strong motivation behind the murals of Aykley Heads.

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<sup>77</sup> Lee, *Painting on the Left*, p.128 and also chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160

In Detroit the aim of the mural was to provide the residents there with the idea of a 'historical continuum' in which the people could see themselves on the walls of important buildings. They were produced at a time when the city was crippled by economic decline. The Detroit murals painted in 1932-1933 which are often used as a visual icon for the city aimed to develop interest in industrial design as well as 'promoting a greater understanding, acceptance and celebration of the working class.'<sup>79</sup> Linda Bank Downs confirms the importance of the worker within Rivera's murals; not only do they carry out the 'important ritual sacrifice of energy to sustain the order of the industrial cosmos, but they are themselves godlike.'<sup>80</sup> A similar motivation can be noted in the Durham commission where the Council aimed to provide a positive image of the future as part of a natural line of progression and improvement. Whilst Cornish's miners were not portrayed as godlike they were often perceived to be heroic.

It is interesting then, that the theme of the mural did not reflect the miner working at the coal face or demonstrate the technicalities of industry like Stanley Spencer's mural depicting Clyde side shipbuilders in 1940-41. This mural was a commission from the War Artists Advisory Committee. Cornish was already familiar with the work of Spencer through CEMA organised touring exhibitions held at the Spennymoor Settlement. Spencer also exhibited at *The Mirror and Square* 1952, alongside Cornish. Timothy Hyman notes the influence of Rivera's Detroit murals in Stanley's commission and also emphasises how the commission is the closest English art has come to social realism.<sup>81</sup> Hyman describes the mural, which when the sequences were added together would make up a frieze some seventy feet long, as 'determinedly homely and non-heroic'.<sup>82</sup>

The iconography of the worker is a recurrent theme within Cornish's work. Regional journalists and critics continuously praised his art for the way in which it ennobles the worker. There is a strong degree of heroism in Cornish's depiction of mining life. Rivera's workers were seen at work carrying out their integral role within industry. Instead of portraying 'work' Cornish was asked to depict the Gala event,

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<sup>79</sup> Downs, *Diego Rivera*, p. 21- 22.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>81</sup> Hyman, T. and Wright, P. ed. (2001) *Stanley Spencer*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, p. 206.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

the symbolism of which will be considered in the following pages. It seems clear that the Council wanted to depict an aspect of traditional life associated with industrial development, but not to depict the industry itself. In doing so, the Council were able to ignore the prevailing economic uncertainty of the mining industry in favour of a lively and vibrant scene which draws heavily on the political consciousness of the miner and his battle for improved conditions. The mural then does not represent the worker as godlike as Rivera does or 'non-heroic' like Stanley's shipbuilders.

Cornish's miner is shown in celebratory mood, looking forward to the future and full of optimism. The conflict in this portrayal remains clear but despite the economic uncertainty, the Council needed to reinforce a belief in a positive future. The building and the mural serve in part to create feelings of confidence and buoyancy in the County's economic and cultural future.

### **The Durham Gala Mural.**

The Durham mural serves a didactic purpose. The narrative is one of regional pride in which the position of the miner is central to the County's identity and culture. Cornish's ability to convey message and meaning is unquestionable. Equally so it is obvious that he understood the potency of the mural as a form of art with things to say. So what did Cornish's Gala themed mural say to visitors at Aykley Heads? The mural is in the reception hall of the building and without specific knowledge of its location it would only be noticeable to the visitor if they were walking towards the reception as if to leave the building.<sup>83</sup> The Gala provides visitors with a celebratory vision of pit life. It connotes an image of one large mining community joined together with a shared political and social outlook. The County is portrayed as cohesive, vibrant and unified.

Cornish's finished mural shows families enjoying the Gala with brass bands, banners and the silhouette of Durham Cathedral on the horizon (figures 82 and 83).

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<sup>83</sup> The original discussions concerning the commissions demonstrate that thought was given to the location of the murals within the structure of the building. From the photographs taken of Cornish's and Pattison's murals, it is possible to identify uplighters fixed to the wall beneath the mural. However there are also a number of hanging light fixtures which obscure parts of the mural and disrupt the effect of the image upon the viewer. They are noticeable in the photographs. It seems that the murals were of secondary importance to the structure. Their decorative function was paramount rather than the need to see them unobstructed from all angles and approaches.

The painting is filled by the throng of the crowd and the 'sea of people' Cornish had initially envisaged are painted in bright colours suggesting a vibrant and lively scene. The painting is punctuated by the inclusion of a centrally placed banner depicting two miners shaking hands with the words 'Unity is Strength' emblazoned above. Cornish himself features with his young son John perched on his shoulders. The scene despite being crowded with figures suggests a sense of order as all the figures are walking in the same direction. The emphasis upon family is utmost. Not only has Cornish depicted his own family, but there are numerous small children accompanying their parents.

The crowd is used by Cornish to fill the physical space of the mural but also to create the vibrancy and hustle of the Gala celebrations. The uniformity of the parade, the rows of banners and band instruments which stretch far back into the distance create a sense of the huge scale of the parade. This uniformity is in contrast to the spectators who are shown together in family huddles. The crowd includes cloth capped men accompanied by their wives and small children who demonstrate obvious excitement at the spectacle in front of them. The crowds appear overwhelmingly vast but they present no threat.



Figure 83  
Norman Cornish.  
*The Big Meeting* 1963  
oil on canvas

The creation of a small grass circle of space at the front of the picture invites the viewer into the scene. The deliberate use of this part of the canvas allows the observer to understand the vastness of the crowd. It also draws attention to the

importance of the cathedral set on the hill in the backdrop. Durham's Cathedral plays an important religious role within the Gala celebrations. During the day's event the crowd walks to the cathedral where a service is held and respects are paid to those who have lost their lives at the pit.<sup>84</sup>

The concept of the crowd has received much academic interest. Collective ceremonial gatherings fell outside the scope of George Rudé's definition of the crowd.<sup>85</sup> Robert Holton argues that instead of using a vague conceptualization of the crowd, studies should instead approach crowd activity in the vein of Durkheim and his model of social solidarity. Holton argues that crowd study should be an investigation into why social movements, communities or societies become involved in collective behaviour and the function and meaning of this.<sup>86</sup> Whilst this approach is clearly more specific in its use of Durkheimian principles to analyse the crowd it still retains the crowd as an abstract conception based upon notions of 'collective conscience'. Whilst academics continue to consider the linguistic implications of terms such as 'crowd' 'mob' and 'riot', it is easier in some ways easier to distinguish the variation in visual depictions.

Cornish's depiction of the crowd is reassuring in contrast to that depicted in Hogarth's *The Idle Prentice Executed at Tyburn* (figure 84). The print forms part of the moralistic series *Industry and Idleness 1747*, which traces the life of two apprentices, one hard working and the other idle. The crowd here is seen as disorganised, unruly and volatile. Sporadic fighting appears to have broken out and

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<sup>84</sup> The remembrance plaque at Durham Cathedral reads, 'REMEMBER BEFORE GOD THE DURHAM MINERS WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR LIVES IN THE PITS OF THIS COUNTY AND THOSE WHO WORK IN DARKNESS AND DANGER TODAY.'

<sup>85</sup> Rudé, G. (1964) *The Crowd in History A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p.4. See Thompson, E.P. (1993) 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century, in *Customs in Common*, London: Penguin, and Davis, N.Z. (1987) *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Cambridge: Polity, Milgram, S. and Toch, H. (1969) 'Collective Behaviour: Crowds and Social Movements,' in G. Lindzey and E. Aronson *Handbook of Social Psychology*, USA: Addison-Wesley, p.570.<sup>86</sup> Harrison. M, (1988) *Crowds in History Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.9. Stevenson. J and Quinault. R ed. *Popular Protest and Public Order Six Studies in British History*, London: George Allen and Unwin, p.17.

<sup>86</sup> R. Holton (1978) 'The crowd in history: some problems of theory and method' in *Social History* vol. III No. 2 May, p.221.



William Hogarth  
*The Idle Prentice Executed at Tyburn 1747.*

The way Cornish presents smaller groups as part of the larger crowd is reminiscent of Spencer's *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* 1947 (figure 85). In particular, the way in which Cornish depicts the group at the front of the mural. In Spencer's work, the family group on the right panel are huddled together, arms around each other in celebration of the resurrection of the dead (figure 86 detail from *The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter*). Cornish's central group is similar to Spencer's in its formation as a group of adults embrace one another. Like Spencer, Cornish includes a young child within the group who is shown looking outwards from the group towards the distance, perhaps in a gesture of future hope (figure 87 Detail from *The Miners' Gala*).



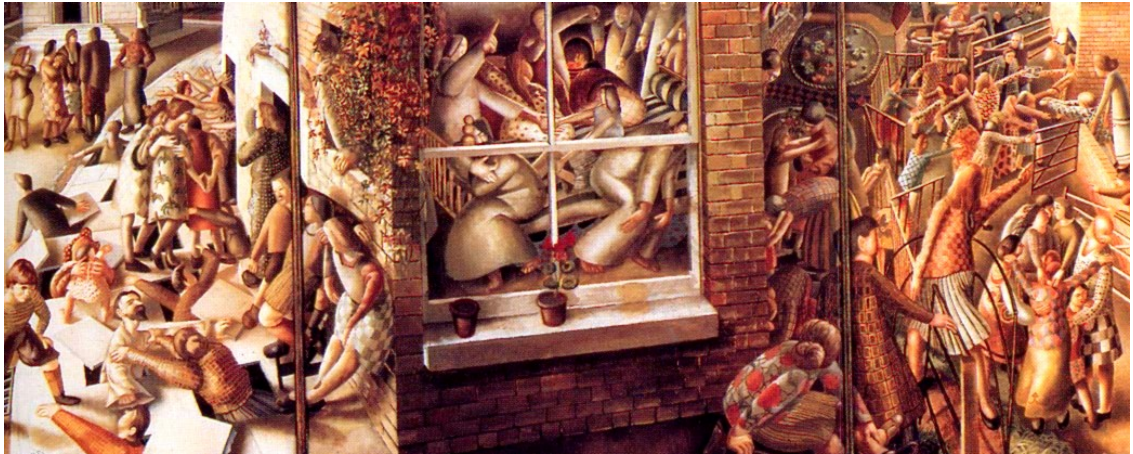


Figure 85  
Stanley Spencer  
*The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* 1947.  
Oil on canvas



Figure 86  
Detail from Stanley Spencer  
*The Resurrection with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* 1947.  
Oil on canvas



Figure 87  
Detail from Norman Cornish  
*The Big Meeting*  
Oil on canvas

Cornish depicts himself within the mural emphasising his knowledge of mural conventions in which it was accepted for an artist to depict themselves within the scene. Frank Brangwyn's first major commission was for Skinners' Hall in London 1901-09. The murals were commissioned to demonstrate the livery company's history and were to hang in the newly refurbished Banqueting Hall. In the panel *Pelts and Furs*, Brangwyn portrays himself as one of the primitives- rough, half-naked and carrying knives. Willsden interprets his self-portrayal as revealing the artist's sympathy with the common man. It also supports Brangwyn's belief in the ideal of fellowship, in which the common people who work with their hands are artists too.<sup>87</sup>

The inclusion of the artist in the mural was an accepted convention. However, what is of particular interest is the way in which the artist incorporates himself in the work. Brangwyn's self-depiction shows himself involved with and at one with the common people whereas Rivera distinguished himself as a manager by way of his clothing. The bowler hat set him apart from the workers in his Detroit Murals (figure 89 detail from the Detroit Murals). Spencer depicted himself in his Strathclyde mural as one of the workers, suggesting that he was more than a detached observer seeing his work as a collaboration with the workers.<sup>88</sup> Within the Gala mural, Cornish depicts his own self-image as an observer and not as a participator (figure 88 detail from *The Miners' Gala*). In this sense Cornish acknowledges the

<sup>87</sup> Willsden, *Mural Painting*, pp 83-93

<sup>88</sup> Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, p.213.

importance of the lodges but does not show himself as associated with one of them. Cornish can be identified on the bottom left of the mural standing with his son John perched on his shoulders amidst the other crowd members.



Figure 88  
Detail from the mural showing Cornish with his son John sitting on his shoulders enjoying the view of the passing Gala.

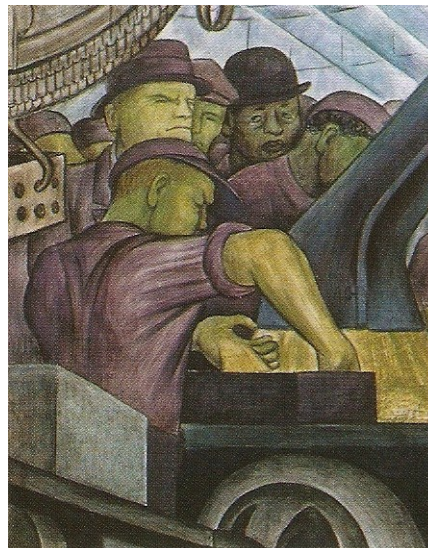


Figure 89  
Diego Rivera  
Detroit Murals  
Detail from Rivera's mural in which he depicts himself as a manager wearing a bowler hat.

The Durham Miners' Gala is an annual event rich in mining tradition. Its trade union origins have imbued it with a socialist outlook and this political significance is central to its importance within mining communities.<sup>89</sup> For example a political speech

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<sup>89</sup> The first mass lodge meeting was held in 1871 at Wharton Park. The Durham Chronicle reported that 5,000 people had been in attendance. The following year was the first Durham Miners' Gala occurred. *Durham Chronicle* 18<sup>th</sup> August, 1871, quoted in Emery, N. (1992) *The Coalminers of Durham*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd. p.111.

at the Gala provided a 'magnificent opportunity for socialist propaganda before an audience of thousands of miners and their families.'<sup>90</sup> Also, the event was intrinsically working class. Up until the nationalisation of the mines, managers were not invited to attend as the event was exclusively for the worker. The 1947 Gala was the feature subject of *Mining Review* the following year. The commentator noted how there was a change in atmosphere since the mines were handed over to the people. The 1947 Gala provided Herbert Morrison, Deputy Prime Minister, with the opportunity to address the workers of the newly nationalised industry.

Now I want you men of the pits to come through. I want this great scheme of nationalisation to succeed triumphantly. The whole country is watching to see how this great new organisation, this new adventure, this new experiment, comes out. The great experiment of socialism in a democracy depends on you. The whole future we are trying to build up in our country is for all our people, and all our children, and it depends on you.<sup>91</sup>

Morrison's speech drew on the symbolism of the Gala's socialist origin and presented nationalism as the fruition of the miners' struggle in which success was dependent upon them.

Socialist sentiments are echoed within the symbolism of lodge banners. Their iconography draws heavily on communism and the use of particular phrases reflect solidarity, brotherhood and strength in unionism.<sup>92</sup> The themes incorporated in the banners were iconic in their own right portraying union leaders, mines, mining scenes such as pit heads as well as religious and social welfare issues. Cornish himself had been commissioned to design two banners for local mines during 1958. For the Westerton Drift mine, he was asked to depict the current mining situation. The theme he settled on depicted a training officer with his arm around the shoulders of a young trainee. Compasses and set squares are laid out on a table in front of the men and are suggestive of the 'modern, scientific outlook' of mining.<sup>93</sup> Cornish also

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<sup>90</sup> Gregory, *The Miners and British Politics*, p.73.

<sup>91</sup> *Mining Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> year, No 5, 1948. The Durham Gala that was featured in *Mining Review* took place on 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1947.

<sup>92</sup> Chopwell's 1955 banner included an image of Lenin and Marx along with the hammer and sickle. Whilst, Blackhall Lodge infers communist sentiment through the captions 'socialism through evolution' and 'need before greed'.

<sup>93</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of life*, p.34. Colls interprets the inclusion of pictures of high production pits on banners as a sign that the miners perceived their industry as part of the modern world. The concept of training was a post-war development which signified the progress of the NCB as an advanced



designed the banner for Tudhoe Mill Drift Mine which featured a picture of the mine on one side and on the reverse a depiction of The Big Meeting which has been described as 'lively' and 'full of bustle' (figure 91 Hugh Gaitskell Leader of the Labour Party unveils Tudhoe Park Lodge banner).<sup>94</sup> The design of the banner led a local journalist to conclude, 'Mr. Cornish is of some repute as an artist'.<sup>95</sup>



Figure 90

The banner of Follonsby Lodge, Wardley. The banner was one of three in the British coalfield to feature Lenin. The other figures featured include James Connolly who was executed after the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, and Keir Hardie. It presented a combination of local union leaders as well politicians and revolutionaries. Earlier this year a press appeal was launched to recreate this unique miners' banner.

Source: *Sunday Sun* 21/06/2009.

The importance of the Gala within Durham's mining tradition cannot be understated.<sup>96</sup> At its peak the event attracted a quarter of a million people. The ritualistic element of the parade is suggested by the fact that an official route is never

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nationalised industry. The modernisation of the industry was an element of pride for both the NCB and the miners. In *Mining Review*, the NCB's monthly cine-magazine, the development of training colleges such as the one established in Ashington, Northumberland were regularly promoted as were the advancements in machinery used in high production pits. See also Colls, *Identity of England*, p. 313.

<sup>94</sup>Emery, N. (1998) *Banners of the Durham Coalfield*, Sutton Publishing Ltd; illustrated edition, p.16.

<sup>95</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 19<sup>th</sup> June, 1958.

<sup>96</sup> The Gala remains an annual event within the county and is testament to its importance within County Durham's regional and cultural identity. However together with the cessation of mining within the region, is a decline in numbers who attend the attraction. For many regional historians the decline in mining equated to a loss in political and social meaning, Dufferwiel writes, 'What has passed has been a proud but sad shadow of what has been lost.' Dufferwiel, *Durham*, p. 174.

planned; 'it all goes according to tradition.'<sup>97</sup> It was a visually spectacular event in which the throng of the crowd was punctuated by miners carrying banners emblazoned with the symbols of their lodge. The banner was an extension of their pit, their lodge and importantly their identity. Given its importance within the Gala it is understandable that the banner holds a central place within Cornish's mural design. Drawing on the elements of socialism, the banner shows two miners expressing solidarity with one another through a handshake. The caption above borrows a stock union slogan affirming that 'Unity is Strength.' The message contained is unmistakable it represents left wing politics and advocates the potency of joint political action through unionism. The mural's incorporation of a union slogan and image was clearly acceptable and in some ways necessary to carry the true meaning and historical context from which the Gala originated. Like the post office murals of interwar America which incorporated a grand story culminating in a positive vista, the mural's depiction of regional developments within the County represented the fruition of the miners' past battles.



Figure 91  
Hugh Gaitskell Leader of the Labour Party unveils Tudhoe Park Lodge banner  
accompanied by Sam Watson, General Secretary, D.M.A, 1958.

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<sup>97</sup> *Mining Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> year, No 5, 1948.

Cornish is not known for his strong political views and this makes the inclusion of an overtly political message within the banner all the more interesting. In an interview for *Topic* magazine in 1962 Cornish stated, 'I'm not what you would call politically committed, but I feel that if my work can make people stop for a moment and see something beautiful, something dramatic, in a thing they usually take for granted...'<sup>98</sup> Throughout his career Cornish has made a conscious effort to avoid any strong political association. In many ways he relies on the fact that he is a miner to define his political affiliation, referring to a pay dispute for instance as a matter of 'Union honour'.<sup>99</sup> Likewise he was sensitive to the fact that even though Edward Heath was a patron of his art, the suggestion of being photographed with the future Conservative prime minister represented career suicide to him. Living in such a staunch Labour stronghold, Cornish reputedly told his Stone Gallery agent Tilly Marshall that if he posed with Heath he would 'Never get another man to speak to me in Spennymoor-and then what would I do-it would be an end to painting.'<sup>100</sup> Ironically, Heath's patronage of Cornish did little to assist the prime minister in his dispute with the NUM over the three day week, and it was this controversy which eventually brought an end to his Conservative government in 1974.

The brass band is of special significance in creating the overall atmosphere of the Gala and for many it is a symbol of the North (figure 93 still from *The Big Meeting*).<sup>101</sup> Cornish conducted a large amount of research into the formation of the brass band and the way in which instruments are held and played. To do this he often went to watch local brass bands as they practiced using the opportunity to make preparatory sketches (figure 92 *Tuba Player*).<sup>102</sup> The extent to which Cornish immersed himself in the Gala theme is clear from the following passage,

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<sup>98</sup> *Topic*, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1962.

<sup>99</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of life* p.39.

<sup>100</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, p. 106. The continued support of the Labour party within the region is demonstrated by an analysis of voting patterns see Butler, D., (2000). 'Electors and Elected' pp.385-411 in Halsay, A., with Webb, J., in *Twentieth century British Social Trends* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London: Macmillan Press.

<sup>101</sup> Redmayne, *Men, Mines and Memories*, p. 21.

<sup>102</sup> Cornish describes how, 'I drew their instruments, also featured in the painting, after I had researched the brass band marching formation during the Miners' Gala. Apparently the drum is carried in the centre of the band for safety reasons, and the trombones lead in the front so as not to hit people with their slides.' Cornish, *A Slice of life*, p. 51-52

It is not just visually that I experience a subject. My sense of hearing, touch and taste contribute equally. When I was painting the bandsmen in the Durham mural, I found myself tapping my feet to the tune. I could feel the jostling of the crowd and sense the blood pressure of the whole town.<sup>103</sup>



Figure 92  
Norman Cornish  
Tuba Player.



Figure 93  
Still from *The Big Meeting*.

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<sup>103</sup> *Evening Gazette*, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1963.



The popularity of the Gala celebrations as a suitable theme for commissions was demonstrated in 1976 when Tom McGuinness was commissioned by Barclays Bank to produce an oil painting of the parade. McManners and Wales describe how the picture ‘with its vibrant primary colours showing the miners at play contrasts starkly with the sombre hues of his working pitmen.’<sup>104</sup> The scene includes the same key elements present within the Cornish mural such as the band and banner but the scene is set as the parade passes through Durham City. The location is possibly dictated by the fact the commission was from the bank whose premises are in Durham Market place. The characteristically hunched and misshapen figures of McGuinness is present in both the crowd and the parade. Significantly there is an orderly space between the crowd and parade. The suggestion of a divide between the participants and the observers is unusual in the sense that Cornish’s depiction and the documentary footage examined in the next section emphasise the participatory nature of the crowd. They show the observers as integral to the parade dancing and running alongside the band and often the demarcation between parade and observer is blurred. Perhaps the ordered partition in the crowd is suggestive of the symbolic importance placed upon the parade. The parting of the crowd in an almost biblical sense demonstrates the respect of the observers for what is passing in front of them. The crowd itself is made up of family groups ranging from babes in arms to elderly family members (figure 94 *Miners’ Gala 1976*).

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<sup>104</sup> McManners, and Wales, *McGuinness*, p.66.

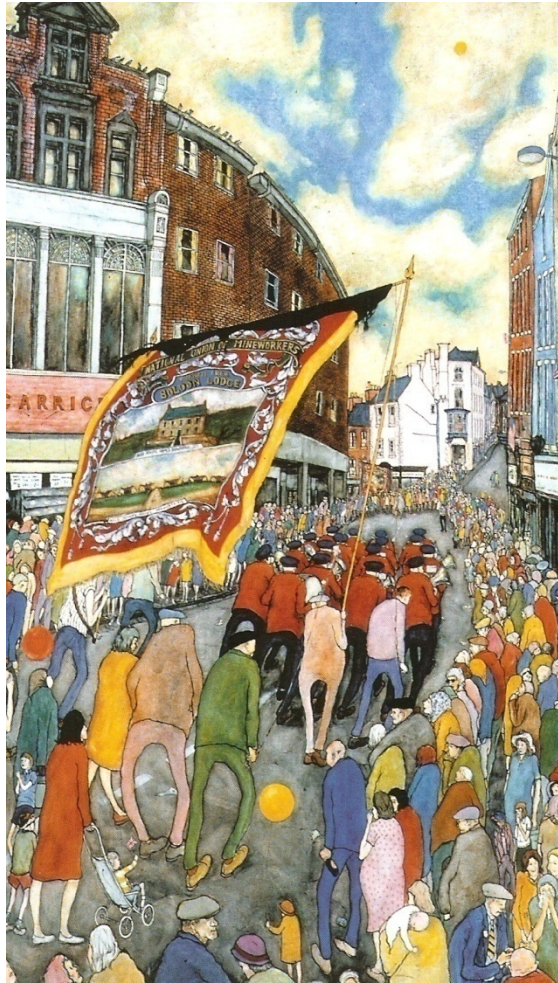


Figure 94  
Tom McGuinness  
*Miners' Gala 1976*  
Oil on canvas

### **The Durham Miners' Gala and social documentary.**

Cornish's depiction of the Miners' Gala can be contrasted with a number of others of the time. In 1962 the British Film Institute Experimental Film Fund awarded John Irwin £750 to carry out a project documenting the annual Gala held in Durham.<sup>105</sup> The finished documentary received a great deal of criticism and the work was described as a 'disgrace' to the BFI Experimental Film Fund by a 'leading American Quarterly'.<sup>106</sup> As will be discussed further on, the criticisms of the film

<sup>105</sup> Director John Irwin a former student at the London School of Film Technique had previously submitted his proposal to a commercial company but this had been rejected. In the same year, Irwin had established Mithras Films his co-funded independent production company. Programme synopsis by Christophe Dupin at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/457188/index.html>.

<sup>106</sup> *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, The British Film Institute, Volume 31, no. 367 August 1964, p. 125.

stemmed largely from the overt sexual references and the way rowdy drunken behaviour of crowd members resulted in several arrests. This portrayal of the Gala showed a less sanitised version in comparison to official documentaries produced by the NCB such as *The Big Meeting* which will also be discussed in this comparison. In defending the work, the *The Monthly Film Bulletin* writes,

It is an important film because it shows to the southern English, and any others who want to look, something about the life and politics of England which they are very prone to overlook: the almost ritualistic social strength of the miners' union in a northern mining city, and the basic source of power of the Labour Party. The party rally is deeply imbued with a sense of region [and] at the same time, the tremendous vitality and energy of the young people, also derived from the locality...<sup>107</sup>

In conclusion the *Bulletin* confirmed the film to be '...positive, vital, pulsing with energy, and deeply in tune with the people it is showing.'<sup>108</sup> This was proven not to be entirely the case. When the documentary was shown to North East audiences by the BBC in 1964, viewers were outraged by the scene of an intimate couple being watched by a 'peeping tom'.<sup>109</sup> The matter was raised in the House of Commons by Dame Irene Ward who demanded an apology from the Director-General of the BBC. The M.P argued that the documentary was allegedly 'faked in certain respects,' and that it was 'in the national interest that documentary programmes should be true representation of fact.'<sup>110</sup>

The documentary lasts approximately 25 minutes and was filmed on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> July 1962, the very same year of the Cornish commission. It features the standard scenes of Gala Day including the rousing political speeches of Hugh Gaitskell and George Brown listened to by 'an older more sober crowd', the brass band, the banners and the general jovial attitude of the crowd.<sup>111</sup> The film however focuses heavily upon the youth in the crowd (figure 95 *A young woman watches the passing parade*, Still from *Gala Day*). Groups of girls are shown dancing in the street

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.125

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.125

<sup>109</sup> Programme synopsis by Christophe Dupin at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/457188/index.html>.

<sup>110</sup> House of Commons Debate 30 January 1964 vol. 688 cc535-43. As a result the documentary was not shown by the BBC for over a year. Programme synopsis by Christophe Dupin at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/457188/index.html>

<sup>111</sup> Programme synopsis by Christophe Dupin at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/457188/index.html>

wearing cowboy hats to a brass band playing 'When The Saints Go Marching In', whilst the bars and arcades are filled with young women and young men (figures 96 and 97 stills from *Gala Day*). The men are dressed distinctively in drainpipe trousers reflecting the 1950s Teddy Boy style. The flat cap in this film is reserved solely for the elder members of the crowd. This sense of modernity and the presence of youth culture is completely missing from Cornish's mural.



Figure 95  
A young woman watches the passing parade.  
Still from *Gala Day*.



Figure 96  
Gala Girls enjoying the celebrations.  
Still from *Gala Day*.



Figure 97

At one point a young couple is shown disappearing into the woods whilst a man with binoculars watches their activities from a far. As the day progresses rowdy behaviour inevitably attracts the attention of the police who pursue a youth whilst

bystanders cheer (figures 98 and 99 stills from *Gala Day*). The overriding sentiment expressed in this portrayal of the Durham Gala is the predominance of youth culture. This contrasts sharply with the Gala image produced by Cornish. From his canvas, teenagers are completely missing. By contrast the footage of a young couple in the woods in the film is overt enough for the viewer to understand what is being suggested without the need to be overtly sexually explicit. It is a scene far removed from the family Gala painted by Cornish.

The absence of the teenager in Cornish's work is interesting. As a young boy, Cornish's childhood like many others came to an abrupt end the day he entered work at the pit. The transitional teenage period which separated childhood from adulthood was significantly absent in mining culture and also it appears within the work of Cornish. The teenager represents a significant talking point in another depiction of the Gala.



Figure 98  
Young men play up to the camera.



Figure 99  
The police arrest a rowdy spectator.  
Stills from *Gala Day*.

The NCB's 1963 production *The Big Meeting* presents teenagers behaving more moderately but also demonstrates their 'separateness' from the rest of the crowd.<sup>112</sup> An elderly female voice discusses the post-war development of young men and women dancing along to the procession. This woman suggests that the parade needs to 'come in line' more with teenagers by embracing their jovial attitude towards the Gala celebrations and also through the incorporation of modern music and dance such as the rock and roll American inspired 'Twist'. For Bill Osgerby the

<sup>112</sup> *The Big Meeting* 1963 produced by the NCB Film Unit. The full documentary is available from Screenonline at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/726247/index.html>.

teenager is a social construction. His study of *Youth in Britain* sees the Second World War as a turning point in British youth culture. Long-term economic trends linked to various factors such as employment opportunities and consumerism resulted in significant changes in the profile and 'visibility' of the teenager.<sup>113</sup> He argues that there was an eagerness to depict young people as 'uniquely separate from wider 'adult' society.'<sup>114</sup> His argument finds credence in the representation of youth within both documentaries; the teenager is present as a distinct sub-culture within the community.

The presentation of the Gala in the NCB's documentary *The Big Meeting* is far closer to Cornish's own interpretation of the Gala and of general mining life. Produced by Donald Alexander and shown in cinemas across the country this official production places emphasis on the Gala as an event steeped in tradition and of vast social significance.<sup>115</sup> The commentary to the film is provided by a series of local voices whose heavy Durham accents add an authenticity to the descriptive narrative. The voices are distinguished by their 'unrehearsed naturalism.'<sup>116</sup> The static camera position is in contrast to the hand held camera shots of *Gala Day* in which the camera is jostled along with the flow and movement of the crowd. The opening sequence dedicates the film to Sam Watson General Secretary of the NUM and later footage shows extracts of Hugh Gaitskell's speech in which he praises Watson's commitment to the Durham miner.

The opening shots of the documentary show a misty but idyllic Durham morning. The commentary is mainly concerned with establishing the tradition involved in the Gala and as a result the importance of the banner and the brass band is stressed. The commentary explains that if a miner is killed at work, the local lodge banner and the band will be included within the cortege as a mark of respect. Likewise, the men chosen to carry the banner on Gala day see the duty as a great honour. These insights into the cultural significance of the banner and the band define this documentary. Unlike Irwin's *Gala Day*, the NCB presents 'community

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<sup>113</sup> Osgerby, B. (1998) *Youth in Britain since 1945* Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 2-3, 77, 22.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>115</sup> Alexander headed up the NCB's Film Unit from 1953-1963. For further biographical information on Alexander see Patrick Russell's biography at [www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/1144929/index](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/1144929/index).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.,

cohesion' as 'the ideologically binding theme' of the documentary.<sup>117</sup> The NCB's 'official' version of the Gala negates any suggestion of violence and reveals that the only cost to the council is the clean-up operation which totals £180.

The documentary also reinforces the domestic role of women in mining communities. Footage shows miners' wives baking, ironing and carrying out other domestic chores in preparation for the Gala (figure 100 still from *The Big Meeting*). The domestic ideals imposed upon a miner's wife are replicated within the local media and can certainly be identified within Cornish's own depiction of his wife Sarah.



Figure 100

Still taken from the NCB documentary '*The Big Meeting*,' shows a miner's wife preparing for the Gala.

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<sup>117</sup>Quote from the synopsis written by Patrick Russell.  
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/726247/index.html>





Figure 101  
Figure 101 *The Northern Echo's* 'Home page' featuring Sarah Cornish 1964.

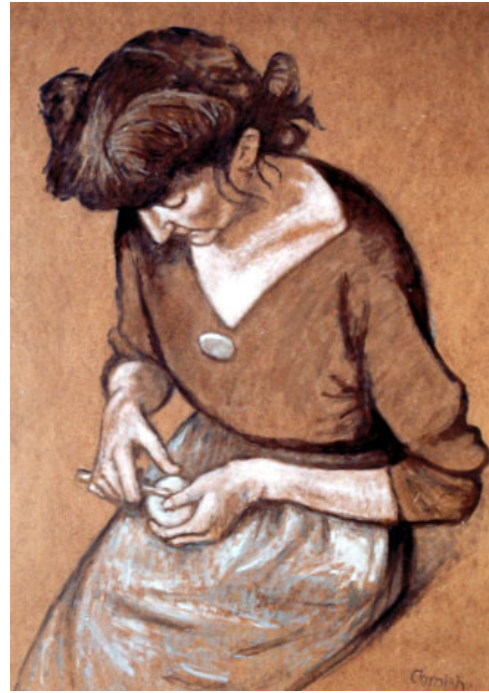


Figure 102

Figure 102 Norman Cornish, *Sarah* .

The contrast between the two images is stark. The photograph included in *The Northern Echo* shows Sarah in a bright clean modern looking kitchen. She is dressed fashionably, her glossy hair is neatly pinned and she poses with a relaxed smile for the photograph (figure 101). Cornish depicts Sarah in a completely different manner. Her clothes are drab and plain and her hair is dishevelled, with her head bowed she appears engrossed in her task. Cornish depicts Sarah in isolation, the scene is barren and there is no furniture or backdrop. In many ways, she resembles a nineteenth century peasant more than a 1960s housewife (figure 102 *Sarah*).

The way Cornish depicts Sarah here is reminiscent of some of the work produced by Suzanne Valadon, the post-impressionist artist. In figure 103 *Autoportrait* 1894, the similarities are apparent as Valadon presents herself in plain earthy tones. Her hair is dishevelled and her clothes are basic and without detail, in much the same way as Sarah's. Valadon's self-portrait is simple and without any background.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Despite becoming an artist's model for Renoir and Toulouse-Lautrec, Valadon experienced an impoverished upbringing. She was the child of an unmarried char woman, who was forced to support herself at a young age through various jobs such as a waitressing and even became a trapeze artist. Valadon was encouraged to pursue an artistic career by Toulouse-Lautrec as well as Degas whom



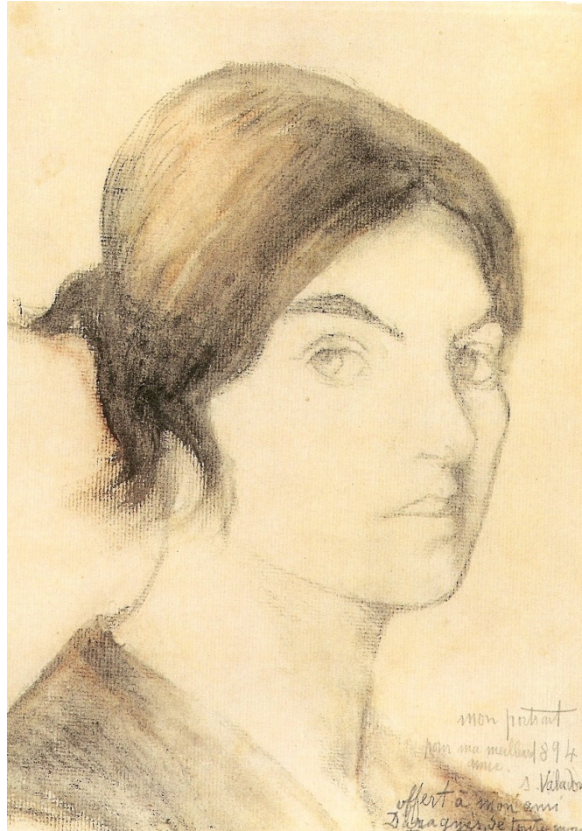


Figure 103  
Suzanne Valadon  
*Autoportrait* 1894  
Fusain on paper

Valadon specialised in still life, portraiture, landscapes as well as female nudes. Her female nudes along with the sketches of her son are particularly intimate scenes which show her subjects bathing, washing and fixing their hair. Jeanine Warnod draws similarities with Degas in terms of the subject matter, however she points out that Valadon only selects and draws the lines that provide the models with expression and help to underpin the emotions which Valadon felt when she painted them. Cornish's *Bath Time Oils* (figure 64, page 184) is again reminiscent of some of Valadon's work, in which children are tenderly dried down by their mother or grandmother. The background is sparse and Valadon like Cornish focuses upon the relationship between the characters as opposed to how they relate with their environment. The change in emphasis with some of Cornish's larger bar room

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she remained friends with until his death in 1917. Warnod, J. (1981) *Suzanne Valadon*, Naefels: Bonfini Press, p. 51.

scenes or depictions of the pit road is dramatic. In these scenes the environment and setting dominate over the individual.

The photograph of Sarah featured in *The Northern Echo* in 1964. It was included in 'Home page,' a section of the paper in which the wives of 'North-East personalities' were asked to discuss their husbands' taste in food. Sarah provides a recipe for cauliflower soup which is a family favourite. She uses her 'absolutely essential' pressure cooker to make the soup confirming "it's a wonderful time saver."

<sup>119</sup> The article reports,

A kipper a day is the artist's traditional diet, but not when the artist has a cook like Sarah Cornish. She is the wife of Spennymoor miner and leading North-east artist. Mrs. Cornish believes in fresh, wholesome cooking for her family: "miners work up a good appetite and need plain, substantial food." She fries as little as possible and buys plenty of vegetables.

In a separate article also in *The Northern Echo* Sarah is portrayed as the perfect homemaker. 'I sew and knit most of my spare time,' she said, 'making clothes for the children and myself.' Her devotion to her family is her defining characteristic. Quoting at length from the article is useful to understand how Sarah Cornish is portrayed as the epitome of a perfect wife,

Looking after her husband and their two children. Ann 14 and John 7, in their two-up, two-down colliery house keeps Sarah Cornish happy. She delights in simple things-embroidery, cooking, taking long walks. She calls herself a pottering housewife and apart from attending the Methodist chapel does little outside of her home. Her life isn't all that different from that of any miner's wife.

The simplicity of her life is underlined when she confides to the reporter that she does not see her life changing much in the future, 'At 43 her main ambition is to grow with her children and be happy.' The reporter confirms her commitment to her husband, 'Her life now and always will revolve around him.'<sup>120</sup> The article is quick to comment upon the mark of a good housewife which is of course reflected in the efficient management of the home. In this sense Sarah Cornish does not disappoint, 'Her small living room is light and airy, spick and span. The furniture is modern and

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<sup>119</sup> *Northern Echo*, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1964.

<sup>120</sup> *Northern Echo*, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1964.

colourful, and there are some pretty pottery pieces on the mantelpiece.' The walls naturally are decorated with Cornish paintings and drawings.<sup>121</sup>

All of the articles quoted acknowledge the importance of an efficient home and in the case of the *Sunday Sun* reporter a large proportion of Cornish's success can be attributed to the support of his wife, '*Sarah Cornish is essentially patient and understanding, otherwise she could not tolerate the paint-splashed wallpaper, the brushes, canvasses, and sketches among cosmetics on her dressing table.*' The supportive role of women in assisting their husbands' achievements is perceived here as vital, 'A woman can help or hinder a man, make or break him and Sarah Cornish is quietly and self-effacingly at work making her man.'<sup>122</sup> There can be no doubt that these interpretations define women in mining communities by their domestic capability and by standards of cleanliness, efficiency, tolerance and above all their devotion to family life.<sup>123</sup> The portrayal of Sarah as wife, mother, cook, and cleaner stood in opposition to the increased interest in female rights. By the late 1960s the Women's Liberation Movement began to campaign in favour of equal opportunities and equal pay.<sup>124</sup> In many ways Sarah is the epitome of the Northern working class woman upholding traditional values.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>122</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1960.

<sup>123</sup> A further point of interest is the fact that on the occasions when Sarah Cornish is interviewed for a local paper, the journalist is always female. These female journalists present the image of the working class wife as being essentially defined by her domestic role. Aspiration in the case of Sarah Cornish is to maintain standards and remain devoted to her family and home.

<sup>124</sup> Hewison, R. (1986) *Too Much, Art and society in the sixties, 1960-1975*, London: Methuen pp. 216-219.



Figure 104  
Still from *The Big Meeting*.

Some of the street scenes used in the NCB documentary can be contrasted with Cornish's depictions. In this case, unlike the portrayal of Sarah, a degree of similarity can be noted. One scene in the footage shows a back lane lined either side by rows of terraced houses. The background is bleak in contrast to the brilliant white of the washing blowing on the line. A stray whippet is also shown running across the street (figure 104 still from *The Big Meeting*). All of these components, the row of houses, the bellowing white sheets on the washing line and the whippet can be identified within Cornish's Spennymoor scenes. The reinforcement of these elements within the NCB footage confirms their importance to the geographic location of the scene whilst emphasising a sense of 'Northernness'.

Naturally, the media used to present the Gala ultimately has an impact upon the finished result. Murals are steeped in historical tradition and artistic convention. As has been discussed the mural as an art form is often used to convey important moralistic issues. In contrast, social documentary is contemporary, and often used to portray an event in a progressive or radical manner. Patrick Russell's analysis of the NCB's production describes the film as 'uncomplicated' in its 'generosity towards working class culture'. This he finds 'all the more moving today in the light of the later decimation of the communities it celebrates'.<sup>125</sup> The Durham Miners' Gala was a

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<sup>125</sup> Quote from the synopsis written by Patrick Russell.  
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/726247/index.html>

visual, traditional and vibrant celebration of mining life in the county. For the NCB it was an event with tremendous potential to present miners as socially conscious, politically alert and generally well behaved members of a community. In Cornish's mural, the pit culture of Durham is also presented as particularly vibrant.

Themes of community tradition, social cohesion and collective memory are identifiable in both the NCB's *The Big Meeting* and Cornish's Gala mural. In contrast Irwin's *Gala Day* 1963 reflects the social tensions presented by the teenager. Whilst these anxieties were mildly expressed in the NCB's film the overall tradition and meaning of the Gala remains vital. In Irwin's film there is sense that this tradition is somewhat lost on the younger generation.

## **Conclusion.**

Economic change signalled cultural change. Planning and development decisions were physically altering the landscape of the mining community. The presence of cultural change was an intrinsic part of new town planning and the proposed destruction of Category D villages. Whilst change was enforced upon residents, wider issues were being felt less obviously such as the emergence of a younger generation whose interest in dancing the 'twist' was far greater than listening to brass bands play 'When the saints go marching in.'

The Durham Gala Mural represented the Council's ambition to combine tradition and modernity in a way that could be interpreted as natural progress and development. The necessity within the region to blend old and new and negate any signs of cultural conflict has been present within the region since the 1950s. Council leaders, the local media and the heritage industry all find it necessary to draw on aspects of the region's past in order to anchor the region as part of a continuous development.

The Mural reflects Durham County Council's need to establish their political vision within the context of traditional regional identity. The necessity of providing a historical continuum through the commissioning of murals was aimed at anchoring the modernism of the new Council offices at Aykley Heads within the deep tradition

of mining life which was at the core of the County. The chapter began with the suggestion that Cornish's mural represented something of a contradiction in light of the Council's decision to categorise mining villages. Instead it would be argued that Cornish was the ideal choice. His comfortable presentation of mining life celebrated the political passion, commitment and community spirit that the Council hoped to foster within the new housing estates. The mural represented an idealistic vision in which the future was marked by social improvement and better conditions.

# Chapter six

## The Stone Gallery.



## The Stone Gallery 1959-1969.

In 1963 the *Radio Times* boldly declared that 'The working class has become fashionable.'<sup>1</sup> It seemed appropriate that the programme it referred to, John Mapplebeck's 'A Good and comely Life' should feature Norman Cornish, who at the time was rapidly becoming one of the North East's most important artists.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will consider the growing regional appeal of Cornish during the decade 1959-1969 in which the Stone Gallery in Newcastle played a significant role in promoting the work of Cornish.<sup>3</sup> Cornish's popularity at this time can be seen as part of a growing sense of regionalism in which the role of the local media was central. The press were crucial in fostering his development as a local legend and this in turn added to Cornish's regional appeal.

### **'Avant-Garde' Newcastle.**

'There can't have been many galleries in the 1960s where you could buy drawings and paintings by Dante Gabriel Rosseti and L.S. Lowry. But you could at the Stone Gallery.'<sup>4</sup> The first section of this chapter aims to identify the key features of Newcastle's art scene and the position of the Stone Gallery within this. What type of art did they exhibit, who were its patrons and what influence did the Gallery have on the regional art market? Once this has been achieved the following sections will concentrate upon Cornish, his exhibitions at the Stone Gallery and the media response to his work.

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<sup>1</sup> *Radio Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1963. Cornish and Chaplin were interviewed for this broadcast. Mapplebeck describes how 'From these diverse views we hope to present a picture of the qualities, strength and weaknesses of working class life.'

<sup>2</sup> The programme also featured interviews with Richard Hoggart, John Braine, Reg Smythe, and Tom Courtenay. This list of names reflects the influence of Northern writers, artists and actors within national culture at the time.

<sup>3</sup> Even though Cornish's formal association with the Stone Gallery was to last until 1980, this section is primarily concerned with the period 1959-1969 as this decade marks a particularly productive and experimental period in the artist's career.

<sup>4</sup> *The Journal Culture Magazine*, November 2008.



In opening the Stone Gallery Ronald and Tilly Marshall hoped to 'internationalise' the regional art scene.<sup>5</sup> Their first exhibition *Modern British Painters* held in June 1958 was impressive and featured work by Graham Sutherland, Peter Lanyon, William Gear and John Piper.<sup>6</sup> As the *Sunday Telegraph* was later to confirm 'The Stone Gallery, which exhibits the best modern painters, is beginning to gain international standing'.<sup>7</sup> The national success of the Stone Gallery's early exhibitions prompted its director Ronald Marshall to boldly claim that in 1963 Newcastle was 'the most *avant-garde* provincial city in England'.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 105  
L.S. Lowry  
*The Stone Gallery*

Marshall's claim formed part of an interview in which the *Sunday Telegraph* reporter Virginia Makins went in search of the reality of 'Hailsham's Province'.<sup>9</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> The Stone Gallery was first opened in 1918 and began life as a fine art shop located centrally within Newcastle. Tilly Marshall originally purchased the shop in 1937 but it was not until 1958, when the Marshalls' purchased the shop next door that the Stone became an exhibiting gallery.

<sup>6</sup> Pasmore had been invited to exhibit. However, his absence was due to his involvement in the new town development of Peterlee.

<sup>7</sup> *Sunday Telegraph*, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1963.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>9</sup> The Hailsham Report published in 1963 was a government white paper which dealt with the economic crisis within the North East. Lord Hailsham had been appointed Minister for the North East by Macmillan in January 1963. Despite being a Conservative politician in a Labour stronghold, Hailsham did receive the support of influential mining leader Sam Watson. The appointment of Hailsham represented a significant departure from traditional economic thinking. However, the change

doing so she embarked upon a journey which echoed that of numerous social commentators who had from the 1930s onwards visited the region to observe scenes of social deprivation and economic decline. Writing about the North East in what were clichéd but standard terms, she described the familiar image of ‘Two Nations’ in which her ‘Immediate mental picture -glittering, cosmopolitan, civilised South, fulfilling, stereophonic super-panavision life; gloomy, harrowed North, grimy industry, dole queues...The North East –worse still a special case, Hailsham-land.’<sup>10</sup>

Makins was on this occasion proven incorrect for upon her arrival she identified both art and retailing as areas which demonstrated the city’s prosperity and vibrancy. A walk down Newcastle’s Northumberland Street confirmed to Makins that ‘There was certainly no hint of the underprivileged provincial parent store in the Fenwicks’ window, full of jazzy plaid knickerbockers and long wool evening skirts, or its delicatessen advertising 50 kinds of bread.’<sup>11</sup> Likewise visiting the premises of the Stone Gallery confirmed the presence of an assertive and knowledgeable art buying public. Ronald Marshall is quoted once more claiming, “My clients aren’t influenced by the glossies and P.R men,” “They make up their own minds. But they won’t buy junk,” and he waved at an unsold picture.’<sup>12</sup> Makins regarded this artistic preference as being suggestive of a deeper separateness which rested upon a parochial complacency for the local and amateur. It was a perceptive point and the following pages aim to analyse how the artistic preferences of the Stone Gallery’s patrons and the local press had a profound influence on the Gallery’s exhibition programme.

Newcastle’s avant garde status during this period was examined by Hilary Fawcett who characterised the city’s fashion and retailing industry in terms of ‘distinct limitations.’<sup>13</sup> Despite these limitations she recalls how Newcastle still

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of government in 1964 and the relative economic prosperity marked an end to any sustained or coherent regional development programme initiated by the government. Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee*, pp.152-156. Ministry of Housing and Local Government, (1963) *The North East- a Programme for Regional Development and Growth*, Command 2206, London: HMSO.

<sup>10</sup> *Sunday Telegraph*, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1963

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>13</sup> According to Fawcett the introduction of Quant’s “Ginger Group” collection in 1964 was Fenwicks’ ‘tentative attempt to engage with the developing fashion Zeitgeist.’ In summary it was not until the 1970s that fashion shops would provide a version of the metropolitan 1960’s to the region and whilst Fenwicks may have offered a wide range of choice as suggested in the article in reality it offered a

represented 'something grand and exciting' to those who lived outside of the city. Fawcett's own recollection of the Stone Gallery proves particularly interesting. As a King's College student in the 1960s she remembers the Stone Gallery as having an 'exotic appeal,' specialising in interesting and arty greeting cards along with stainless steel and Scandinavian jewellery.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the Stone Gallery was noted by Fawcett for its contribution to fashion within the city as opposed to the art exhibitions it held. Given the limitations in retailing and fashion, how vibrant was the art scene in the city and importantly what contribution did the Stone Gallery make to this?

To understand Newcastle's art scene during the 1950s and 1960s, it is necessary to highlight the disparity between key political and educational bodies whose influences were felt independently from the establishment of small commercial galleries such as the Stone Gallery. For example the changes to the teaching programme at King's College following the appointment of Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton ensured the department gained a national and international reputation securing its position as the most advanced and progressive in the country.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the profound impact that Kings College had on the national art scene, Paul Usherwood is quick to point out that its effects upon the region and the local art scene were limited. The metropolitan focus of the College encouraged a strong disdain for the local art scene, preferring to let local and amateur artists fill the catalogue of the Federation of the Northern Art Societies annual exhibitions held at the Laing Art Gallery. This point is confirmed by considering the artists of the Spennymoor Settlement who were guaranteed regular exposure at the show year after year.

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diluted version of high fashion to the north-east female consumer. Fawcett, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" in *Made in Newcastle Visual Culture*, p.27-28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> The Fine Art course at Kings College in Newcastle had established a growing national and international reputation based upon the style and quality of teaching there at the time. The experimental approach towards art teaching secured the department's reputation as the most advanced and progressive in the country. The appointment of Lawrence Gowing as Professor of Fine Arts in 1949 marked the beginning of these changes at Kings College, which at the time was still part of Durham University. Gowing appointed his former Euston Road School colleague Victor Pasmore to teach the art component of the Fine Art Course whilst Richard Hamilton taught the design side. Based on the foundation course of the 'Bauhaus' in Germany, the Pasmore/Hamilton basic design course addressed the fundamentals of point, line, shape, colour, tone, texture, form, structure, and space. Usherwood, 'Art on the Margins,' p. 254-255.

Significantly, Usherwood argues that the art produced by King's College students and the type of art they aspired to, lacked any real connection with regional developments.<sup>16</sup> Marion Scott, however, highlights the involvement of Kings College with the wider community.<sup>17</sup> Examples such as Pasmore's role in the development of Peterlee, alongside Hamilton's design work at the Gulbenkian Art Gallery at the People's Theatre have been singled out to highlight a wider community involvement.<sup>18</sup> Pasmore was also influential in the establishment of the independent Univision Gallery which opened during 1957 and was located in Newcastle's Bigg Market.<sup>19</sup>

Tilly Marshall confirms that during the 1960s the Newcastle art scene was heavily influenced by politicians who were seeking 'popular favour by fostering their policy of 'regionalism'.<sup>20</sup> The Gallery's first exhibition which had featured works by artists of national and international reputation, Sutherland, Lanyon and Gear had received a mixed reaction and Marshall claims that there were 'mutterings' from the regionalists and local amateur artists. Clearly there was an expectation that the Gallery should support the work of local artists.

Central to this discussion is an understanding of regionalism. In terms of the Stone Gallery there was an expectation that regionalism entailed a large degree of support for the local artist in terms of promoting work through exhibitions. It is argued however, that 'regionalism' had several interpretations depending on who was using the term. In this sense the local press clearly interpreted 'regionalism' in a cultural sense whilst recognising the instincts of their readers. Local support for Cornish stemmed from a sense of pride in the region's working class roots, tradition and a firm belief in the often mythical depiction of community. Regionalism was about pride in the region. As will be discussed further on in this chapter, the press interpreted regionalism as loyalty to the local artist and consistently demonstrated this through

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.255.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, M, (1996) 'Post-War Developments in Art in Newcastle: Was it a Golden Age?' in *Northern Review*, A Journal of regional and cultural affairs, volume 4, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Shelagh Wilson, 'Art and Design Education in Post-war Newcastle' in *Made in Newcastle, Visual Culture*, p 57.

<sup>19</sup> Pasmore not only assisted in its opening exhibition but also donated an initial sum towards its establishment. Vall, 'Cultural Improvers,' p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, p.154.

positive reviews of Cornish in which he compared favourably with other exhibitors from elsewhere.

T. Dan Smith's version of regionalism aimed to cultivate a similar sense of regional pride but this was regulated by the political and economic necessity to modernise the city. As was illustrated by the opening of Cruddas Park, which was discussed in chapter five, Smith's regionalism was a selective process which drew on aspects of the past to stimulate a sense of pride in the region's heritage as well as a vision for the future. Celebration of the Blaydon Races was an event which had been chosen for its comparability to the recent programme of modernisation in which the historic route of the *Blaydon Races* anthem was used to highlight recent improvements. Likewise, Smith's artistic preference was demonstrated through his public art commissions. Ultimately it was the abstract murals of Pasmore which decorated Newcastle's Civic Centre in contrast to County Hall in Durham where Cornish was the artist of choice.

Such choices strongly suggest that the modernist vision of Tyneside epitomised in the policies of T. Dan Smith was in many ways incompatible with the portrayal of the region by Cornish. Cornish's work represented everything that Smith wanted to move away from. In terms of Council art commissions Smith looked towards the teaching staff at King's College for inspiration. Smith's interpretation of regionalism combined aspects of tradition with bold architecture, modern planning and cultural re-education.

During this period art was a topic of regional political debate. Ian Bransom, a local Conservative politician, was a prominent critic of the Labour Council and what appeared to be its extravagant expenditure on the Civic Centre, libraries and galleries. Recently commissioned public art was, according to Bransom, both 'atrocious' and 'deplorable.' He promised to 'to stop Socialist infiltration into the Jesmond area'. As part of this political wrangle The *Evening Chronicle* described at length the position of the Stone Gallery during 1964,

The Stone must be the shining white example of Mr.Bransom's policies.  
Unfortunately it has run at a loss present year being the first hope of levelling costs,

or perhaps making a slight profit, despite its elegant façade of thick carpets and satin curtains. There has been a great deal of cynicism about this little capitalist venture; “I wish it were,” said Mr. Marshall, the proprietor. It is not too idealistic to say that to give the city a good, small gallery is his primary aim.<sup>21</sup>

It is perhaps ironic that whilst Bransom promised to stop socialist infiltration in middle class Jesmond, the Stone Gallery’s main exhibiting artist was a working class miner from Spennymoor. The extract from the *Evening Chronicle* also hints at the insecurity of the Stone Gallery’s financial position. Certainly finance is a particular aspect which may have contributed to the frequency with which Cornish exhibited at the Gallery. This will be discussed in detail in the following section. For now it is sufficient to say that the regular coverage and positive praise from the local press was essential to the financial buoyancy of the Stone Gallery. In contrast to the nature of their first exhibition of *Modern British Painters*, the Marshalls shrewdly altered their exhibition programme accordingly to accommodate for the tastes of their local clientele whose overwhelming preference was Cornish.

Exactly who did the Stone Gallery regard as their clientele? The local press presented the Gallery as central to Newcastle’s art scene; it was ‘an exchange station for cultures’ used by ‘a great number of students.’<sup>22</sup> They claim there was a wider academic interest in Norman Cornish and that local students were keen to study and research the work of the artist.<sup>23</sup> Ronald Marshall was also eager to emphasise this when he was interviewed for *The Journal* in 1968. The Stone Gallery director said ‘Norman’s previous shows here were sell-outs.’ ‘A considerable number of young people buy Cornish. They are mainly at training colleges in the North of England who have to write a thesis on painters of the industrial scene.’<sup>24</sup> Certainly the kind of clientele who largely frequented the Gallery were more likely to be derived from the neighbouring middle class suburbs.<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly the Gallery’s success was reliant upon its ‘circle of enthusiastic collectors, mainly with modest purses, who come to every exhibition at least half a dozen times.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1964.

<sup>22</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1964.

<sup>23</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> *The Journal*, 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> *The Evening Chronicle* reported how Cornish could even count a surgeon from Newcastle as one of his clients. *The Evening Chronicle*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>26</sup> *Evening Standard*, 1963, newspaper clipping from NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

The Stone Gallery's influence is more obviously detected in the permanent acquisitions of the neighbouring Laing Art Gallery. In 1960 the Laing Art Gallery purchased two Cornish pieces. One of these was the oil painting *Pit Road*.<sup>27</sup> *The Times* commenting upon the exhibition in which this work was first exhibited singled out the work as 'spare' and 'sombre' 'but the least original.'<sup>28</sup> When discussing the exhibition in general, *The Times* correspondent is even less enthusiastic, 'The industrial midlands and the north of England seem to produce draughtsmen with a wiry, vigorous line, a pronounced feeling for perspective but a colour sense at best in tone with the greys of the landscape. Mr. Norman Cornish is one of these.'<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the broadsheet's less than impressive write up of the painting, *Pit Road* was utilised repeatedly by the local media to illustrate articles on the exhibition and to reflect the nature of his work (figure 106). The image was even included in Chaplin's influential *Guardian* article in which he described 'The narrow world of Norman Cornish.'<sup>30</sup>



Figure 106  
Norman Cornish  
*Pit Road*  
Oil on Board  
Laing Art Gallery  
Image TWCMS: G12960.

<sup>27</sup> The other piece purchased was a 'Study of a young Girl', pastel on paper.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1960.

<sup>29</sup> The exhibition was covered in *The Times* on two separate occasions. On one occasion an image of the small oil painting 'Man and Trucks 1960' was included. The caption states that the painting was purchased via telegram by an American collector. *The Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1960. Cornish, *Slice of Life* p.39.

<sup>30</sup> *The Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

In 1959, the Marshalls' became William MacTaggart's English agents.<sup>31</sup> A landscape painter, MacTaggart's earlier years were heavily influenced by the work of Edvard Munch particularly in his adoption of vibrant and intense colour.<sup>32</sup> However, in later life MacTaggart's introduction to the work of the Expressionist painter Roualt was of influence and marked the most fruitful and consistent phase of his career. It was this phase which ultimately 'saw him established as one of the grand old men of Scottish art...' <sup>33</sup>



Figure 107  
William MacTaggart  
*Studio Table*  
Oil on Canvas  
1959  
Tyne and Wear Museums TWCMS G12959

<sup>31</sup> MacTaggart exhibits at the Stone Gallery in 1960, 1962 and 1964. His artistic pedigree was already established through the reputation of his paternal grandfather the distinguished Scottish landscape painter William McTaggart (1835-1910). MacTaggart had studied at Edinburgh College of Art alongside Crozier, Gillies, Geissler and Anne Redpath (who also was to exhibit at the Stone Gallery). In 1923, MacTaggart and a selection of his College peers formed the 1922 Group which was named after the year that the majority of them had obtained their diploma. The group exhibited annually for the next eight years at the New Gallery in Edinburgh's Shandwick place. In 1955, MacTaggart was to become Secretary of the Royal Scottish Academy, followed four years later with his appointment as President. See Iain Gale's introduction to Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, (1998) *William MacTaggart*, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland. This work was published in conjunction with MacTaggart's exhibition held at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art 14th February-10th May.

<sup>32</sup> MacTaggart had been instrumental in organising an exhibition of works by the artist Edvard Munch for the Society of Scottish Artists in 1931. Gale, *MacTaggart* p.18. Iain Gale regards the adoption of vibrant colour as Munch's most notable influence upon MacTaggart. He acknowledges that MacTaggart's work may not have had the depth of symbolic content that was present within Munch's, but nevertheless he maintains that 'Often it seems as if the absence of the figure of a woman tearing her hair or a man buried with his head in despair is all that sets MacTaggart's work apart from the Norwegians melancholia.' p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20



For his debut at the Stone Gallery, MacTaggart exhibited alongside established modern masters such as Picasso and Moore. His exhibition in 1960 was met with 'great acclaim' and a painting by the artist was purchased by the Laing Art Gallery that year. The influence of Roualt is discernable in *Studio Table*, 1959, (figure 107) with its thick black outlines creating a stained glass appearance.<sup>34</sup> Once again the purchase of the painting by the Laing Art Gallery confirms the impact of the Stone Gallery and its exhibitions on the local art scene.

The Marshalls had always maintained their interest in Pre-Raphaelite art and this brought them a point of commonality with the artist L. S. Lowry.<sup>35</sup> From as early as 1959 the Stone Gallery acted as dealer for Lowry and also frequently exhibited his work. The Marshalls experienced a unique relationship with the Salford artist and he even became a shareholder in the Gallery when it was forced to close in 1965. The intensity of the affiliation is clear, Tilly Marshall describes how Lowry came to tea one evening and stayed for fourteen years.<sup>36</sup> For Lowry, the Stone Gallery appears to have acted as a welcoming refuge and became a regular calling point as part of his increasingly frequent visits to nearby Seaburn in Sunderland.

The Stone Gallery indeed appeared to offer an attractive retreat to many artists and writers. Like Lowry, Sid Chaplin was also drawn to it. At the time Chaplin was both 'novelist and PRO' for the NCB.<sup>37</sup> He also played an instrumental role in promoting both Cornish and the Gallery to external sources such as the NCB and the press. When interviewed for the *Evening Standard* in 1963, Sid Chaplin enthused 'The Stone to me represents a revolution.' Despite declaring his preference for abstraction, the article revealed Chaplin owned two small studies by Cornish,

Sid Chaplin and his wife live on the edge of Newcastle in a semi-detached Victorian house full of books –local history, Blake, rare editions of Thomas Bewick. Round the sitting room are their few much prized works of art, a glass vase painted by Bewick

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<sup>34</sup> See the Tyne and Wear archives and museums art online website [www.twmuseums.org.uk/ourcollections/online/](http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/ourcollections/online/) and also Gale, *MacTaggart* p. 20 for further consideration of Roualt's influence on MacTaggart.

<sup>35</sup> In 1966, Lowry and Tilly Marshall founded the Pre-Raphaelite Society. Entry to the PRS was based upon ownership of a Pre-Raphaelite work. In fact Lowry purchased Rosetti's *Pandora* for his 'adopted god-daughter' Carol Ann Lowry in order for her to become a member of the PRS. See *The Independent*, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Rohde, S. (1999) *L.S Lowry: a biography*, Salford Quays: Lowry Press, p.376.

<sup>37</sup> *Evening Standard*, 1963, newspaper clipping from NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

and found in a junk-shop, by the door a large water-colour of flowers by William MacTaggart, President of the Royal Scottish Academy, and tucked away in a corner a small calligraphic drawing by William Johnstone.<sup>38</sup>

The love of art appeared infectious in the Chaplin household. Interviewed as part of the 'North East Wives' feature in the *Northern Echo*, Rene Chaplin's leisure time was divided between cooking, especially 'trying out new dishes' and 'Painting and literature... I like to see modern paintings and what young artists are doing. We go often to the Stone Gallery'.<sup>39</sup> The positive endorsement of the Gallery by the regionally popular Chaplin family was invaluable. It also sheds light on the type of clientele it attracted. Despite the working class origins of the Chaplin family, their middle class aspirations were apparent. Living in the leafy middle class suburb of Jesmond, their patronage of the Stone Gallery appeared an integral part of their transition in terms of class and cultural status.

The financial security of success reaped obvious financial rewards, 'I get something nice every time he has a success,' explains Rene Chaplin, 'A piece of silver or a piece of jewellery'.<sup>40</sup> Eager though to retain contact with her roots she expressed the hope that she was 'not damaged by success. It would distress me very much if my friends thought I had changed. I never want to be too big for my boots.'<sup>41</sup> These changes all point to a shift towards middle class status for the Chaplins. It is a significant point of contrast that Cornish obstinately refused to move away from Spennymoor. This decision, it will be argued was fundamental to the maintenance of his image as the 'pitman-painter' who was rooted in his community.

A further point to consider is how Chaplin also viewed the Stone Gallery as a place of cultural exchange. *The Evening Standard* was quick to point out that patrons treat the place more like a club than a Gallery and how for Chaplin 'As a novelist, this was what the Stone Gallery had brought him most of all; kinship between artist and artist.'<sup>42</sup> In many ways the Stone Gallery acted as a replacement for the solidarity and cultural development that Chaplin and Cornish had enjoyed at the Spennymoor

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>39</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1964.

<sup>40</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1961

<sup>41</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 7<sup>th</sup> May, 1964.

<sup>42</sup> *Evening Standard*, 1963, newspaper clipping from NUL SC GB-0816-SC.

Settlement. That their involvement with the Settlement had gradually waned reflected their move into the world of professionalism and the need to find commercial success.

Through the Stone Gallery Cornish was able to meet Lowry on several occasions. At the time the media interest in comparing the two artists was minimal. More recently the BBC's *Inside Out* programme teased out a supposed 'conflict' between the two artists.<sup>43</sup> The feature which was broadcast in 2006 featured an interview with Tilly Marshall who suggested that there was jealousy on the part of Lowry in relation to his younger rival. Similar suggestions were made in Marshall's book in which she claims on one occasion when both artists were at the Stone Gallery, Lowry told her 'Either he goes or I go!' The issue appeared to stem from Cornish's desire to discuss artistic problems with Lowry, 'The damned man will keep talking art- and you know very well I don't like talking art. Keeps saying he's got a painting problem and wants my advice. Thinks I might help him. I'm damned if I'll help him-why should I?'<sup>44</sup>

Cornish is a little more reserved about the relationship, describing Lowry as having an 'impish sense of humour matched at times with displays of bad temper. He liked to be the centre of attention (and who can blame him after his long struggle for recognition)'.<sup>45</sup> As for the discussions on art which apparently annoyed Lowry so much, Cornish simply acknowledges that Lowry had a 'broad knowledge of painting history and art matters'.<sup>46</sup> It seems obvious that Cornish would look to Lowry for artistic advice especially considering the uncertainty of his position. The Stone Gallery brought Cornish in to contact with the art world but it was an aspect of his life which was far removed from the everyday reality of entering the pit and working as a miner. No longer was he a member of the Settlement which had provided him with the contact and feedback of likeminded men eager to absorb themselves in the theory and practice of art. Cornish must now have felt somewhat isolated. His eagerness to draw on the knowledge of experienced artists (by 1962 Lowry had

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<sup>43</sup> Inside Out –North East Monday January 16 2006. Programme synopsis available at [www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northeast/series9/week\\_two.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northeast/series9/week_two.shtml) .

<sup>44</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, pp39-40.

<sup>45</sup> Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.38

been elected an RA) and, importantly, to feel part of the art world was clearly the motivation behind what Lowry perceived as Cornish's constant badgering on all matters concerning art.

Despite Cornish's move into the professional art world both he and the Marshalls retained contact with Bill Farrell in order to update the Warden with news and stories of progress. Following successful sales at the 1960 exhibition, Ronald Marshall wrote to Farrell.

In short, I think he is well and truly on the way and a thing that will probably worry you [in original document **us** is crossed out in and replaced by **you**], is if he is going to be able to grasp the opportunity, well we think he is going to because he is working hard.<sup>47</sup>

In many respects the letter differentiates two distinct phases of Cornish's career. Marshall has no doubts, unlike Farrell, about the ability of Cornish to pursue a career as a professional artist. The guidance and solidarity once provided by the Settlement had been replaced by the culturally exciting Stone Gallery. Cornish was discovering that there was a wider community beyond Spennymoor that was receptive to his work and the Marshalls were equally keen to provide the public with exactly that.

### **Cornish at the Stone Gallery.**

Cornish's representation by the Stone Gallery signifies a distinct phase in his career. During 1959-1969, Cornish exhibited as a solo artist there on seven occasions. It was, during this period that he made the transition to becoming a full time artist, finally leaving the pit in 1966 at the age of forty-seven. The following sections, will explore the relationship between Cornish, and his Stone Gallery agents. It will consider the critical response from the media towards his exhibitions, and it will also chart the stylistic developments that occurred during this period. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to examine the way in which Cornish was promoted by the gallery and equally importantly, how his work was received by art critics and the general public.

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<sup>47</sup> Letter from Ronald Marshall to William Farrell, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1960, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

In her autobiography, Tilly Marshall describes Cornish's artistic talent,

He has always painted the world about him-not for Cornish the pretty landscapes to which he might have turned in contrast to his life underground. His work was a response to the imponderables of water, weight, pressure and contracting space-the result of years spent in three-foot-high seams; it was not pretty.<sup>48</sup>

Industrial scenes were never Tilly Marshall's preference.<sup>49</sup> However, regardless of Cornish's subject matter her entrepreneurial instinct must have quickly recognised the overwhelming media response to Cornish's first exhibition.

Tilly Marshall understood only too well that her North East patrons '...bought only what they liked, of course, and what they understood.'<sup>50</sup> Familiarity and understanding seemed to dictate artistic preference. This point is strengthened when remembering the opinions of Spennymoor residents whose artistic preference lay with the work of the local artist.<sup>51</sup> The artistic judgement of the Marshalls was confirmed by the response of the local media to Cornish's first exhibition. As will be discussed, the local press repeatedly championed the work of regional artists often to the detriment of their fellow exhibitors from outside of the region.

The *Evening Chronicle* reported that due to excellent sales, the Marshalls were forced to acquire more work for latecomers to purchase.<sup>52</sup> The work featured in the exhibition included a large number of family scenes drawn in pastel along with underground mine scenes. Cornish's first exhibition at the Stone was in terms of sales, critics' praise and positive media coverage, an overwhelming success. So positive was the reaction to his work that the *Evening Chronicle* used the exhibition as a litmus test of public taste, concluding that 'Newcastle art lovers have shown in a decided manner the kind of paintings they like.'<sup>53</sup> And what they appeared to like was undoubtedly Cornish.

In this first exhibition, Cornish was shown along with five Scottish painters. However it was Cornish, the local artist, who stole the show. He received favourable

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<sup>48</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, p.39.

<sup>49</sup> Rohde, *Lowry*, p. 376.

<sup>50</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Enid and Freda Rounsley 17<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

<sup>52</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.,

comparisons with the other exhibiting artists, Roddick Carmichael, Ian Hodgkinson, Alexander McNeish, Alistair Park and Eric Redmond. In an article titled 'Critics praise' the *Evening Gazette* reporter described how the pictures by Cornish 'towered over and dominated the work of the five Scottish painters also on view and which after that of Mr. Cornish appeared complicated and unsatisfactory.'<sup>54</sup> Likewise the *Manchester Guardian* commented that the other exhibitors are 'unlucky to be overshadowed by Cornish. At any other time their own work could have been acknowledged with rather more than just a passing nod.'<sup>55</sup>

The *Northern Echo* correspondent made no attempt to hide his disappointment with the abstract work of the Scottish painters, who were all recent graduates of Edinburgh College of Art.

It must be cold comfort to the five Scottish painters who were the original top-billing for this show, that Cornish overshadows them. Had this not been the case I could have waxed lyrical, with equal enthusiasm, about a group of painters, all entirely new to me, who have two other, further, points in common: all are under 30 and all have shared the same fructifying experience of studying at Edinburgh College of Art.<sup>56</sup>

*Evening Chronicle* art critic Scott Dobson was also drawn towards the work of Cornish preferring him over the Scottish painters. As well as his role as local art critic, Dobson was a practicing artist in the abstract mode.<sup>57</sup> His preference for Cornish appears confusing, especially to himself, 'I find the five Scottish painters lack the authority of Cornish-they are indeed nearer to my particular taste and yet I find them less satisfying...Beside Cornish it is an utter failure...'<sup>58</sup> Dobson defends Cornish's status explaining that whilst he is 'in the main, self-taught... He is not however, in the least primitive.'<sup>59</sup>

Confirmation of Cornish's success was demonstrated by his inclusion in the winter exhibition held at the Stone Gallery later that year. This exhibition lived up to the Stone's growing reputation with the inclusion of works by John Piper and David

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<sup>54</sup> The article from the *Evening Gazette* is undated and was obtained from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>55</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>56</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1959.

<sup>57</sup> Dobson exhibited *Abstract XI* in the 1960 artists of the *Northern Counties* Exhibition held at the Laing Art Gallery. The title of the work leaves little question over Dobson's own artistic stance.

<sup>58</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1959.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*,

Tindle whose 'drab atmospheric London riverscapes' unsurprisingly failed to impress a local art critic.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, there were two other artists exhibiting in this show who also found inspiration in the mining scene, Tom McGuinness and Josef Herman. The opportunity for comparison of the three artists was too great for critics not to seize. Loyalty to the local artists led *The Northern Echo* journalist to conclude that 'set against Tom McGuinness's graphic studies of craggy miners, and against a whole galaxy of Cornish's most impressive work, Herman's modest pen and wash sketches seem a trifle thin.'<sup>61</sup> The *Newcastle Journal* singled out Cornish for combining a 'penetrating eye for the significant with a subtle appreciation of situation and atmosphere.'<sup>62</sup>

Following on from this initial positive response the Marshalls formalised their relationship with Cornish the following year in 1960 when they became his agents. The Gallery's exhibition programme repeatedly featured the work of Cornish. Even the exceptionally loyal local media could not help but comment on the emerging pattern. Referring to the 1962 exhibition, W.E. Johnson used the headline 'Norman Cornish again.'<sup>63</sup> Publishing reviews in both the *Guardian* and the *Northern Echo* Johnson was still enthused by the exhibition claiming that, 'In conte, flowmaster, and occasionally pastel, this is Cornish at his best.'<sup>64</sup>

When the artist exhibited for a fifth time in 1966 and was also invited to display work in the winter exhibition of the same year the press appeared more vocal in their criticism of the Gallery's increasingly predictable programme. 'One wonders' wrote Johnson in *The Northern Echo*, 'since it is less than two years since his last major show, whether perhaps the artist isn't a little in danger of becoming overexposed.'<sup>65</sup> Johnson answered his own question when he pertinently observed that '... from the number of red stars the exhibition is a confirmed commercial

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<sup>60</sup> The other artists included in the winter exhibition were Robin Philipson, Avray Wilson, John Piper, Derwent Wise, Louis James, Irene Körner, David Tindle, Murray McCheyne and John Peace.

<sup>61</sup> *Northern Echo*, 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1959.

<sup>62</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1959.

<sup>63</sup> *Northern Echo*, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1962.

<sup>64</sup> *Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1962.

<sup>65</sup> *Northern Echo*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1966.

success.<sup>66</sup> Marshall in a separate article described how the work is selling like 'hot cakes'.<sup>67</sup>

*The Daily Telegraph* felt the show was 'perhaps the most important-stage in the progress of Norman Cornish.' Amongst the one hundred and ten paintings and drawings, the individual character studies were described as 'shrewd' and 'genial'.<sup>68</sup> The continued commercial and critical success appeared to be enough justification for the consistency with which the artist exhibited at the Stone Gallery. His output was prolific and he was able to prepare huge numbers of new works in a relatively restricted period. This was a further factor which enabled him to exhibit so frequently.

The appeal of Cornish to buyers was of primary importance to the Marshalls; the Stone Gallery was a commercial Gallery after all. As the local press were quick to point out the Gallery's association with Cornish as well as MacTaggart and Lowry reaped its financial reward. An exhibition held in 1965 which included the work of the three artists prompted *The Northern Echo* to comment,

For its 20<sup>th</sup> century contribution the show to a large extent relies on the work of the gallery's two staunchest money-spinning supporters, Sir William MacTaggart and the pitman painter Norman Cornish, to an even greater extent perhaps, on the drawings of L. S. Lowry who, though a useful talisman, has proved to be the gallery's most "expensive" protégé to date.<sup>69</sup>

The financial viability of the Gallery was regularly brought under scrutiny.<sup>70</sup> Despite the Gallery being fortunate to receive a grant of £2000 from the Gulbenkian Trust, generating enough revenue from sales was proving difficult.<sup>71</sup> The regular sales generated by Cornish assisted in providing a reliable source of income. Equally important was the publicity which Cornish brought to the Gallery. By holding frequent Cornish exhibitions, the Gallery was able to secure regular press coverage. The interest in Cornish was predominantly from the local press and television

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<sup>66</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>67</sup> *Northern Despatch*, 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>68</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>69</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1965.

<sup>70</sup> The local press were quick to highlight the failure of local galleries. For example the *Evening Chronicle* reported on the closure of Jesmond's Novo Art Gallery which had only been existence for four months. Such examples contextualise the achievements of the Stone Gallery and its success as a commercial gallery. *Evening Chronicle*, 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1969.

<sup>71</sup> *Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1961.



however his exhibitions also attracted high profile visitors from beyond the region namely the future Prime Minister Edward Heath, who was a well-publicised Cornish collector. Local politicians were also present at Cornish private views. It was reported that whilst attending a private view at the Gallery, the former miner and Labour M.P. Lord Lawson of Beamish reputedly told Cornish, 'Lad, thee shows the thing right every time.'<sup>72</sup> Through the support of Labour M.P Dame Irene Ward a viewing of Cornish's art at Buckingham Palace was also believed to have been arranged.<sup>73</sup> The interest from the NCB has been discussed in chapter four.

Tyne Tees Television executives could also be counted amongst Cornish's most influential patrons. A significant aspect of his career during this period was the development of his media persona. Shortly before his first Stone Gallery exhibition Cornish had been commissioned by H.K. Lewenhak, head of programmes at Tyne Tees Television to produce a series of images which would be used to illustrate a broadcast called *The Burning Question*.<sup>74</sup> The current affairs programme was chaired by Jack Clarke who interviewed various people in relation to their thoughts about the fuel crisis and the future of the coal industry. With the illustration for the show being drawn and discussed by Cornish, Lewenhak showed that his finger was firmly on the cultural pulse by arranging for the show's music to be provided by folk singers Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. Lewenhak was to become both friend and patron of Cornish.

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<sup>72</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1960.

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Ronald Marshall to William Farrell, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1960, DUL ASC GB-0033-SPE.

<sup>74</sup> *The Burning Question* was shown as part of the news programme *Midweek Roundabout* *Midweek Roundabout* was shown on Tyne Tees Television and was an extension of *North-East Roundabout* which was the station's first news programme. The programme had been launched less than a month when Cornish was asked to feature his work which was broadcast on Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February 1959.



Figure 108

An article published in *Studio* appeared with the above image of 'Mother and Child' (figure 108) which had been shown at the 1959 exhibition which according to the art magazine the exhibition represented a 'eulogy to family life.'<sup>75</sup> The image appears in the article courtesy of the private collection of H.K. Lewenhak.

In 1959 Tyne Tees Television went 'in search of art', the station, wrote *The Viewer* 'believes in encouraging art in the North-East -and that applies not only to musical and thespian art, but to the visual arts as well.'<sup>76</sup> Cornish was invited to sit on the judging panel along with John Dinsdale chief of TTT's design department, Eric Dobson lecturer in Fine Art at King's College, and King's College Professor of Fine Art, Kenneth Rowntree. The work of the winning artist would hang on the television centre's main staircase. To promote the competition *The Viewer* included a large feature which showed George Black in the living room of his Gosforth home with a Cornish portrait hanging on the wall. The portrait is of Anne, Cornish's daughter.

The development of Cornish's media persona was carefully cultivated by Tyne Tees Television. During the decade upon which this chapter concentrates, Cornish appeared in five Tyne Tees Television productions. For the 1966 production *Close up on Cornish*, the company even paid for him to travel to Paris where a film crew followed the artist as he visited the capital's galleries. The importance of the trip to Cornish should not be underestimated, 'In fact, this will be the first time I have ever

<sup>75</sup> *Studio* November, 1959, volume.158, no. 799.

<sup>76</sup> *The Viewer*, 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1959.

been out of the country. It'll make a bit of a change, I suppose.' <sup>77</sup> Perhaps it was his matter of fact attitude to these opportunities which viewers found endearing.

The celebrity status of the artist was confirmed when he appeared in a Tyne Tees Television outside broadcast called *Abroad with Behan*. *The Viewer* described the show as 'Dominic Behan goes out and about meeting North East personalities.' <sup>78</sup> The first episode in the series focused upon Norman Cornish, who was clearly now considered to be a North East personality. <sup>79</sup> The development of Cornish's media personality was more than beneficial to the Stone Gallery. Both the local press and Tyne Tees Television found endless journalistic material in Cornish. The result of this was the creation of Cornish as a local celebrity. The growing regularity of Cornish's media coverage thus ensured that by association the Stone Gallery itself was never far from the media's gaze. Media coverage and the interest in Cornish from politicians, industry and importantly local buyers ensured his exhibitions were a guaranteed commercial success. The influence and role of the media in Cornish's transition to a popular media personality will now be considered in depth.

### **More than a visual token?**

The unquestionable appeal of Cornish particularly to the local media will now be considered in the last section of this chapter. This will be considered here in terms of how they viewed his art as a realistic depiction of community life in the North East and how they interpreted the emotional attachment between artist and subject matter. The journalist William Varley stands out as being the only critic who questioned the overwhelming positive reaction towards Cornish. The points he makes are pertinent to the forthcoming discussion. For Varley, there is great concern that Cornish's popularity rests on his appeal as a visual token of regional pride.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Viewer*, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1966.

<sup>78</sup> The episode which featured Cornish was shown on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1968. *The Viewer*, 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1968.

<sup>79</sup> Also included in the series were Dame Irene Ward M.P. for Tynemouth since 1950 and Frank Atkinson (curator of the Bowes museum).

In promoting his artist, Ronald Marshall said 'The thing about him is that, more than anyone else, he captures the North-East scene so faithfully. There is complete honesty in his approach.'<sup>80</sup> The sense that there is something intrinsically Northern about a Cornish work is taken as a given. Through careful cultivation the media have ensured that Norman Cornish is synonymous with the North East. The local press echoed Marshall's thoughts and often depicted Cornish as a realist but always emotionally in touch with the working class community he painted. *The Journal* confirmed the artist's ever-growing regional appeal, 'Things seen and portrayed by Norman Cornish are readily recognisable by most of us.'<sup>81</sup> The realism of Cornish's art is also emphasised by the national press in their coverage of his work. *The Manchester Guardian* praised him as 'the spirited and committed recorder of simple folk about their daily tasks.'<sup>82</sup> *The Times* described his 1968 Stone Gallery exhibition as 'Life in the north' and significantly discussed him as 'A north-eastern man to the core' and 'one of the country's most profound regional artists.'<sup>83</sup> It is an interesting description as it defines Cornish's national significance in purely regional terms.

Whilst Cornish did attract the attention of the national media his popularity should primarily be considered in a regional context. The emotional aspect of Cornish's art was considered by *The Evening Chronicle* as crucial to his limited appeal,

If there is any drawback to his work it could be that in terms of this age he is insufficiently cosmopolitan-the full meaning, sincerity and force of his work could only have full impact upon someone who has lived in, has roots in, a Northern mining community and possesses a deep affinity for such a community that so often such relationships arose.<sup>84</sup>

Whereas the local media infer meanings of community and solidarity in Cornish's art this is often not the case with national press coverage. *The Times* for example sees Cornish's paintings and sketches as 'peculiarly stoical in spirit; for there is something impassive, almost impenetrable, about his miners, their wives, and their children, all of whom seem to exist in isolation from each other.'<sup>85</sup> The critic appears distant from

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<sup>80</sup> *The Journal* 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1968.

<sup>81</sup> *The Journal* 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1968.

<sup>82</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>83</sup> *The Times*, 1968, newspaper clipping from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>84</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1963.

<sup>85</sup> *The Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1964.

the subject matter, and in turn this limits his understanding of the sense of community and shared experience which local journalists find so compelling within Cornish's work. In this sense the realism of Cornish's painting appears too harsh for the *The Times* critic. They appear unable to read into the emotionally complicated 'web of identification' in which each individual is governed by their wider contribution to the community. The North is something which is recognisable by the critic but its meaning will inevitably differ significantly from that of the local journalist who is couched in emotion and sympathy for the artist and his subject matter.

Cornish's media coverage can largely be considered as positive. Criticisms of the artist are minor and often reflect experimental changes in technique and style. For example the ninety works which Cornish exhibited at the 1960 Stone Gallery exhibition differed dramatically from the previous year.<sup>86</sup> Moving away from pastel drawing, Cornish had been experimenting with oils and the critics responded by commenting that not all works on display are an 'unqualified success.' Critics, were however, quick to defend Cornish claiming that his use of oils is measured by the fact that he is still 'finding his way' with this new medium.<sup>87</sup>

For William Varley, art critic, Cornish's skill and subject matter was problematic. Varley's *Guardian* review of the 1966 exhibition raises many issues surrounding the regional reception of Cornish's work. Varley is the only art critic based within the region who actually questions the emotional motivation behind the increasing popularity of Cornish's work. He is critical of Cornish's technique and the choice of medium. 'Compositionally there tends to be an over-reliance on the device of cutting off objects at the picture's lower edge to establish space and depth. Again, the felt-tipped pen drawings often reveal the built-in snares of that medium, superfluous calligraphy and consequent formlessness.' Varley claims Cornish's 'true talent' is to 'describe perceptively the hawk-like profile of a fellow-miner or the catch with a lively swing economic swing of his pose as he leans over the bar.'<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1960.

<sup>87</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 1960. The article is undated but refers to the 1960 Exhibition held at the Stone Gallery. Obtained from a scrapbook belonging to Norman Cornish.

<sup>88</sup> *Guardian*, 7th February, 1968.

However, what is most pertinent in his review is the belief that Cornish's success is based upon an emotional attachment. Making reference to McGuinness and Cornish's relative exhibitions he concludes 'Both exhibitions are successful in that many works have already been sold. One suspects, however, that they would have, anyway, irrespective of their pictorial accomplishment, as visual tokens of regional pride.'<sup>89</sup> Sensing criticism of the artist Johnson wrote 'Some critics tend to under-rate him as a saloon bar sketcher...The question is not so much one of subject matter but whether or not it helps to produce good or great art.'<sup>90</sup> It seems as if questioning the root of Cornish's popularity is tantamount to an act of regional disloyalty. Looking beyond the standard emotional attachment to the work, Varley's point is valid, would the work sell irrespective of its pictorial quality simply because of its subject matter?

It was a point which the critic was to raise two years later as Cornish exhibited at the Stone Gallery for his sixth solo exhibition. Varley re-iterates his previous sentiments arguing that 'Cornish's work, therefore, tends to be primarily enjoyed as visual tokens of regional pride and thereafter response to it is frequently overlaid by cultural and moral, essentially literary, judgements.'<sup>91</sup> This conclusion is centred upon Varley's interpretation of Cornish's limited artistic talent,

'Emotional' painters moreover, have no monopoly of artistic integrity and ultimately it is pictorial values which count. It is precisely these values which, in the main, I find unsatisfactory in Cornish's work. In his oils his application of paint is uncontrolled, in the watercolours colour tends to be used for surface effects-a type of keyed-up naturalism, not really successful either structurally or expressively; typically, he works best in near monochrome...His compositions, too, are often predictable with loose, ill-articulated drawing...' '...Cornish's work is not "serious", but in fairness to him, his better work probably stands at least as much, if not more, chance of survival than today's more anodyne, decorative abstraction.'<sup>92</sup>

It is the confusion between recognising artistic quality and emotional sentimentality which Varley warns against. 'Many people in the North-East admire his paintings but not, I think for their pictorial qualities (for harmonies of drawing, colour, shape and so-on) but because of their subject matter.' Varley believes that

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<sup>89</sup> *Guardian*, January, 1966, newspaper clipping obtained from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.

<sup>90</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1966.

<sup>91</sup> *Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1968.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*,

one of the greatest problems is that Cornish's work is too often interpreted as representing the reality of life in the North-East. Taken as a mirror image of reality, this reading of Spennymoor life is then transposed to represent not only the region but to symbolise Northernness. 'They tend to "read" them not as an artist's inventions but as the region itself and their response becomes a confused and contradictory series of loyal and critical reactions.'

The frustration for Varley is two-fold, not only does he see weakness in the quality of the work but he regards the emotional attachment to be disproportionate,

What I am stressing is that strong feeling in itself is insufficient it must be allied to and expressed by pictorial rigour. It is just this pictorial rigour which Cornish so often lacks. He is not simply a realist; more precisely his work is expressionist-his shapes, lines and colours often being deliberately distorted to become vehicles for his feelings.<sup>93</sup>

He is not completely without praise for Cornish and highlights certain aspects of the 1968 exhibition as more straightforwardly descriptive. *Two-workmen*, is provided as an example, showing a tighter composition with the flowing curves of the workman in contrast to the firm diagonal and vertical of the bus stand.<sup>94</sup>

Varley's dismissal of Cornish's artistic talent is interesting as he stands very much apart from the local critics in voicing his concerns. His belief that Cornish's success is based upon emotional attachment and regional pride is a pertinent point and one which could be equally applicable to the artist's more recent success which is ultimately based upon commercial sales from within the region. Whilst his profile may be at points be national, it is the support of the regional market which has ensured the prolonged interest in his work.

The following chapter considers Cornish's continued commercial success from the 1970s onwards. His regional appeal during this period is bolstered by the local media who ensure that Cornish's interpretation of the North East is never far from the minds of the regional audience. As will also be discussed the association with the University Gallery from 1989 to the present day replicates the decade 1959-

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<sup>93</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1968.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*,

1969. In a similar fashion to the Stone Gallery, the University gallery holds regular, almost yearly Cornish shows in which huge sales are characteristic of the prolonged popularity of the work.

## **Conclusion.**

From 1965 onwards the focus of the Stone Gallery was directed towards the work of Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman-Hunt and Ford Maddox Brown. Tilly Marshall describes how this shift brought a new clientele, presumably one with greater spending power than the modest purses of their loyal local collectors. The result being that the Gallery became more of a dealership.<sup>95</sup> This transition proved problematic and by 1971 the Marshalls found that collectors were reluctant to travel to Newcastle to purchase one piece of art. The solution was simple, a London base was required.<sup>96</sup> This process ultimately signalled an end to the experiment in Newcastle. Cornish's relationship with the Marshalls seemed to sour and even though he is reluctant to reveal the circumstances behind the separation Cornish does confirm that a difference in opinion occurred over the handling of his portfolio. Officially Cornish was to leave the Gallery in 1980.

Cornish was a valuable asset to a commercial gallery as it struggled to establish its place in the region's art scene. Undoubtedly Cornish appealed to a large regional audience whose loyalty to the artist ensured regular Gallery sales. The establishment of Cornish as a media personality also benefitted the Stone Gallery by attracting high profile patrons from the political world as well as maintaining the support of his industrial sponsors the National Coal Board, as discussed in chapter four. Sound financial and promotional reasoning explained the frequency with which Cornish exhibited at the Stone Gallery.

The period 1959-1969 is one which reveals much about Cornish's reception within the region. The local media displayed overwhelming loyalty towards Cornish and with the exception of William Varley, the artist's unparalleled popularity was established. The media response is revealing in terms of the growing sentiment of

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<sup>95</sup> Marshall, *Life with Lowry*, p.188.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p.188.



regionalism. Cornish provides a celebration of the North East's working class heritage. The press perceived a sympathetic but honest approach towards his subject matter which demonstrated the culturally unique community life of the mining town. Cornish's popularity was largely confined to a regional audience and despite the obvious national interest in the working class during the early 1960s, Cornish appears unaffected by this. His success has been and remains dependent upon his regional appeal.

# Chapter seven

## A Changing Landscape.



## A Changing Landscape.

The artistic career of Norman Cornish has spanned over seventy years, during which time the region has undergone substantial economic, social and cultural change. Despite the significance of these changes, the popularity of Cornish's work has remained constant. The regional responses from audiences, combined with the continued support of the local press have been significant factors within this process. This final chapter considers the role of the media in the cultivation of Cornish's legendary status as the 'pitman painter,' but also considers the underlying tension that this sobriquet created. By 1970, Cornish increasingly objected to its implied meaning and the assumption that a man who worked in the mine was not capable of painting. Importantly, the consistency with which regional audiences have responded to Cornish's work is considered alongside patterns of regional identity as well as the wider resurgence of national interest in mining history.

In this chapter, specific aspects of economic change are considered in terms of their wider cultural effects within the region. Likewise, Cornish's reputation and success are contextualised in relation to continuous regional change. By considering Cornish's career in this way, an acknowledgment of the fluidity of identity and culture is ensured. For as Lancaster writes, there is a '...need to see the region as consisting of people and space that is frequently in flux in a series of internal relationships with individual groups and processes and externally interacts with metropolitan, national and transnational forces.'<sup>1</sup>

Alongside, the dramatic shifts in the region's economic fortune, culture and identity have been subject to changes in collective patterns and traditions. Interestingly, throughout Cornish's career his regional popularity has remained constant. This is demonstrated by commercial sales and regular media interest. Earlier chapters have considered some of the various internal and external, regional and national factors which have influenced his success. The NCB's interest in him, for example, was guided by a desire to promote a positive vision of the industry. In doing so, aspects of Cornish's character were particularly appealing, such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Lancaster, 'The North East, England's most distinctive region?' in Lancaster, Newton and Vall ed. *An Agenda for Regional History*, p. 24.

rootedness to his community, the respect he had for mining life and his continued loyalty to the pit, which resulted in a stubborn refusal to live by his art alone. It is interesting to note that these were the same qualities that the local press found endearing.



Figure 109  
Still from *Mining Review*.

The local press have promoted and continue to promote Cornish's legendary status, but importantly they view him as an insider living within the mining community. When William Varley dared to question the response to Cornish's work, his dissent from the wider consensus appears almost as an act of regional treason. With the exception of Varley, local critics have responded positively towards the artist's work. A wider national interest in Cornish's career, however, has never been consistent. Whilst this interest certainly added to his success, his reputation has largely been underpinned by his regional popularity. Importantly, the reputation Cornish established struck a chord with key aspects of regional identity.

The local press, regard his work, as they did throughout the 1960s as offering a sense of timeless 'Northernness.' However, more recently this has been

accompanied by a nostalgic sense of regional pride stemming from industrial decline. Nostalgia now influences the way in which Cornish's work is viewed. Even this sense of nostalgia however, is firmly rooted within specific aspects of regional identity. Bill Williamson writes, 'What unites the various strands of the broader regional pattern is a richly textured sense of a hard-worked past, whose marks evoke not only bitterness and poverty, but the greatness, too, of industrial achievement and the pride that went with it.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Portraying the Pitman Painter.**

The previous chapter focused upon the positive media response to Cornish's exhibitions held at Newcastle's Stone Gallery. It was, during the 1960s, that the artist's legendary status within the region was confirmed. As has been demonstrated earlier, the region at this time was undergoing huge social, cultural and economic reform. The development programmes initiated by local councils provided the setting for a resurgence of regional self-awareness.<sup>3</sup> However, this in itself was to cause problems, as Lancaster argues the period of optimism which characterised the decade, faded alongside the demise of the charismatic Dan Smith. Significantly Lancaster maintains that the 'cultural genie' which had been released could not be put back into the bottle and from this point 'the region embarked upon a journey of cultural self-awareness that to outsiders can appear as self-obsession.'<sup>4</sup> The story of the 'pitman painter' and his growing success was particularly newsworthy in the context of this particular brand of self-celebratory regionalism and Cornish's popularity can be seen as part of this cultural self-awareness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson, B. 'Living the Past Differently, Historical Memory' in the North East, in Colls and Lancaster, (1992, this edition 2005), *Geordies Roots of Regionalism*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> Lancaster, 'The North East, England's most distinctive region?' p. 38

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.29

<sup>5</sup> In response to Keith Wrightson's call to find a midway point within Northern consciousness which is neither 'cringing deference' or 'a strutting in-your-face, manifestation' of Northernness, Russell carefully reminds readers that 'there will, after all, still be an awful lot of cultural assumptions to step around.' Russell, D, 'Culture and the formation of Northern English Identities', in Lancaster, Newton and Vall ed. *An Agenda for Regional History*, p. 286.



Figure 110

Still from *Shapes of Cornish*, 1976.

The local press were instrumental in developing Cornish's reputation and the result of this is central to Cornish's more recent popularity in which current journalists draw heavily upon many of the patterns established in the 1960s. As early as 1962, the *Northern Echo* correspondent proclaimed 'Norman Cornish, the pitman painter from Spennymoor has carved such a niche for himself in his native North-East that he has become something of a legend.'<sup>6</sup> The local press, have since the Spennymoor Settlement days, been Norman Cornish's most loyal advocate. *The Northern Echo* in 2008 continued to applaud Cornish as 'one of the region's most famous living artists,' 'famed for his wonderfully iconic images of working-class life in the North'.<sup>7</sup> The representation of the artist as a regional ambassador was infectious and even the national press were, by the end of the decade focussing on Cornish's wider cultural contribution to the region.

Cornish's appeal lies in his association with particular elements of regional identity which emphasise the distinctiveness of the North East's culture. In Russell's *Looking North*, consideration is given to the 'Northern self-image'.<sup>8</sup> In a separate essay, Russell discusses this self-defined "northern character" as being a fairly settled issue by the middle of the nineteenth century. 'The people of the "North"

<sup>6</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2008, and 29<sup>th</sup> December 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, *Looking North*, p.37.

(usually coded masculine) saw themselves *inter alia*, hard-working and hard playing, physically tough, blunt, shrewd, homely unpretentious, independent of outlook, assertive and possessed of a strong spirit of justness and fairness.<sup>9</sup> Pride is unquestionably a core element of this identity. Historian Bill Williamson writes how this aspect of identity is ‘...firmly anchored to the past where pride has emerged from mere survival. Pride in family, community, cohesiveness and solidarity in the face of adversity has been one way of dealing with low pay, unemployment and social deprivation.’<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Russell’s Northern characteristics refer to a wider North. They have, however, been manipulated here to refer to the North East. In using them, a well rehearsed argument is opened in favour of the distinctiveness of the ‘North East,’ a region which Lancaster argues was prior to the 1930s, relatively unknown as a geographic label.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the key aspects which have been highlighted as distinguishing the region could easily be applied to other regions eager to assert their uniqueness. Williamson argues that all communities are imagined, but ‘being imagined does not make the past and the stories which go with it any less real’. Instead he argues observers must take care to note ‘the occasions when the reality of it matters, when it suits people in the North East to assume their regional identities, to take their history seriously, and when it does not.’<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the point here is that many people within the region adhere to the distinctiveness of the North East, ‘it suits them to assume’ certain qualities and make them their own.<sup>13</sup> All of these defining characteristics linked with a sense of ‘Northernness’ and the North

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<sup>9</sup> Russell notes a growing sense of pride in belonging to the ‘North’ which emerged around the 1920s, which was distinguishable from earlier narrower Victorian loyalties to location. Russell, D, ‘Culture and the formation of Northern English Identities’, in Lancaster, Newton and Vall ed. *An Agenda for Regional History*, p.274-275.

<sup>10</sup> Fowler, P. Robinson, M. and Boniface, P. (2001) ‘Pride and Prejudice: Two Cultures and the North East’s Transition,’ in Tomaney and Ward, *A Region in Transition*, p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> Lancaster, ‘The North East, England’s most distinctive region’ p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Williamson, ‘Living the Past Differently, Historical Memory in the North East,’ p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> More recently Christopher Bryant has combined historical and cultural factors with recent economic and demographic statistics to demonstrate some of the reasons which highlight the North East’s distinctiveness. Certainly, statistics derived from the 2001 census highlight the North East as the most ethnically homogenous region in England with a white British ethnic population of 96.4%. The North East is also distinct in terms of its label as the poorest region with gross disposable income per head the lowest in any English region. Bryant, C. *The nations of Britain*, (2006) Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 217-220. The failure of a regional assembly has been identified as a barometer of distinctiveness. However, as Lancaster points out ‘It does not follow that a “cultural region” is a “political region”’. Lancaster, ‘The North East, England’s most distinctive region?’ p. 36.

East can be identified within the content and development of Cornish's art as well as his personality.

For instance, Cornish's industrial background allowed him to paint the mining community with authenticity and legitimacy. The fact that he remained loyal to his community and refused to leave Spennymoor, has only added greater kudos to his reputation. The extent of local media attention on Cornish was immense with one journalist even commenting that 'In the past few years he has received a barrage of publicity from newspapers, radio and television, enough to confuse even the most self-confident.'<sup>14</sup> Despite such intense interest, according to at least one writer, Cornish appeared detached '...a somewhat reticent and independent figure, untouched by the glare of publicity, and still following a way of life that forms both the subject and the motive of his paintings.'<sup>15</sup> The emphasis upon Cornish continuing to work as a miner irrespective of his flourishing artistic career added authenticity to his position as the 'pitman painter.' Cornish participated in this depiction emphasising his unique position as an 'insider', the community he painted was also the community he belonged to.

In many respects, working as a miner was an advantage to Cornish's career as an artist. It was initially that aspect of his life which had invited public curiosity. The cultural milieu that distinguished the Spennymoor Settlement provided the platform for Cornish to demonstrate his talents. However, it was the way in which Cornish continued working as a miner despite his growing artistic reputation that enabled him to maintain a position of authenticity over his subject matter that was essential to both the local press and the public. The emphasis on this position can be noted in the following extract in which he refers to his 1959 exhibition at the Stone Gallery. Interviewed for the *Evening Chronicle* he is quoted asking about the miner captured in one of his drawings, 'Who but a pitman can understand them?' In the following quote Cornish is confirming his status as an insider. His work is realistic because he knows how the miner thinks and feels, he understands his subject matter.

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<sup>14</sup> *Evening Gazette*, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1963.

<sup>15</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 1964, newspaper clipping from the scrapbook of Norman Cornish.



Down below you see a man sludging along, slung around with cable, lamp, knee pads and other equipment. Only his workmates know that his knees are sore, that he has a hardened cut in the instep where his boot bites deep, and that he wears stockings over his boots in order to stop pieces of grit from dropping into them where they gape at the back away from the back of the heel. Yes, an artist operates best where the roots lie deep.<sup>16</sup>

When Cornish appeared in the Tyne Tees Television series *Monitor* in 1963 he did so alongside Cumbrian artist Sheila Fell also a Stone Gallery exhibitor. A comparison of the two artists was made by the *Evening Chronicle*.

Miss Fell, skilful though she may be, epitomises rather the slightly detached career artist. She lives and works in London, sketches around Aspatria and returns to town to develop her sketches. The result is inevitably a romantic vision, a tutored, cool, visually analytical vision, accomplished and at times even slight.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast the article noted how Cornish 'is not at all the darling of the art schools. Historically his work would be considered by them as reactionary-he is too deeply involved in his subject matter for the professionals often to appreciate fully.'<sup>18</sup>

The documentary shows Fell visiting her native Cumbria to find her subject matter and inspiration before she returns to her London studio where she completes her work. Cornish's art is produced in a completely different process. He is both artist and subject. Self-taught, he produces his art in the bedroom of his colliery home. The *Evening Chronicle* describes him as being 'unconventional as a person,' he is of course unconventional as an artist too. His close friend the writer Sid Chaplin interpreted his uniqueness or his 'bull-headed approach' as 'that rare thing integrity.'

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This integrity was certainly reinforced by Cornish's attitude towards his circumstances. An integral part of the Cornish appeal was his continued loyalty to his working class roots which he demonstrated not only by the subject matter of his art but by his choice to continue working as a miner and living in the same community. That Spennymoor defined his inspiration was highlighted by the journalist Rachel Throckton-How as the reason why 'he hasn't moved to a large house in a swanky neighbourhood. He knows that not only would he and his wife Sarah be unhappy

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<sup>16</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>19</sup> *Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

away from their friends in Spennymoor but he is afraid he would stop painting.<sup>20</sup> Sarah diplomatically reinforces this image stating that her husband's art would suffer if they left Spennymoor, 'There's only one thing. Norman will never move from here: he see's new pictures every time he goes out: I do wish he would have more room for his paintings.' She does express the hope that sometime in the future Norman will not be 'tied' to the pit. Likewise Cornish states 'It would be nice to have a room to work in, but I could never settle under the load of a mortgage-I would feel gagged, strangled, and could never settle to create and paint'.<sup>21</sup>

Further quotes in the local press reinforce the image of this unassuming family. The artist's wife comments, 'We could have a car if we wanted it-and a larger house, I suppose, but these things don't seem very important to us.' However, changes in their circumstances are hinted at with the journalist commenting on the family's love of London for holidays which they found 'exhilarating, if hectic.'<sup>22</sup> In spite of the small changes *The Northern Echo* confidently declared that there were 'No Bohemian antics here.'<sup>23</sup> Reporters noted few changes in the two-up, two-down house in Bishops Close Street. 'There is a big television set, the furniture is smart and well cared for and they intend to buy new contemporary style armchairs when they see the ones they want, but no flamboyance or tinsel glamour is here-just the good comfort of a home.'<sup>24</sup> In emphasising the simplicity of their life, the Cornish's ensured that they never stood apart from their neighbours. In some respects Cornish's growing fame appeared awkward and at times unwanted by his family. The message was clear; Spennymoor was their home and it would remain that way.

The extent to which Cornish was involved with and responsible for his own media image is debateable. Chaplin commented, 'For a writer, listening to him [Cornish] can be immensely rewarding, not only for the anecdotes but also for the shrewd judgments and acute observations.'<sup>25</sup> Interviewing Cornish was often

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<sup>20</sup> *The Journal*, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1960.

<sup>22</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1964.

<sup>23</sup> This article formed part of a series called 'Home Page' in *The Northern Echo* in which 'wives of North-East personalities discuss their husbands' taste in food and give a favourite recipe.'

*The Northern Echo*, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1964.

<sup>24</sup> *The Sunday Sun*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> *Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

effortless for journalists due to his quotable analogies and eagerness to talk about his work. Cornish has always had preferred topics of discussion which he refuses to deviate from. He used his interviews to express his extensive views on humanity, metaphysics or art.

The extent of Cornish's media exposure during the 1960s can be seen in the replication of quotes within different articles. The two following extracts are taken from separate publications in 1962, one dated September and the other October. Cornish is obviously eager to incorporate his analogy of street lamps and bats into his interviews at the time.

Rain glistened on the painter's gaunt face as he strode through the pale yellow cone of a street light. He stopped suddenly. "Look at the strong shadow it throws upon the wall. Like bat's wings, symbolic of...well, something."<sup>26</sup>

*Daily Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1962.

Look', he clutches your shoulder as you walk down the street, 'look at that street lamp. The light exploding from it, and the shield at the top with the light on it-it looks like a bat.'<sup>27</sup>

*Topic*, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1962.

The *Daily Express* reporter summarised Cornish as, 'talking in metaphor and simile, expressing the opinions of a profound thinker.'<sup>28</sup> This was an established pattern within Cornish interviews, in which windmills, bats and crucifixes were all included in discussion of Spennymoor life. Yet, despite the repetition, journalists continued to visit the artist and print the articles. Cornish was keen to remind readers of his self-educated background but was eager to demonstrate that a miner could be knowledgeable about art. 'When he talks of his idol Van Gogh-about 'Vincent', as if he was another pit artist down the same row-there's little in his speech to locate him...But when he talks of the pit the slow, broad querulous 'pitmatic' dialect tears through.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Daily Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1962.

<sup>27</sup> *Topic*, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1962.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Express*, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1962.

<sup>29</sup> *Time and Tide*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1962.

Many critics responded to Cornish's work by making comparisons with the work of Degas or Toulouse Lautrec and the artist was equally open to encouraging such parallels with important artists (figure 111 *Les parapluies* and figure 112 *Girl With Brolly*). One journalist wrote,

We're waiting for the bus out of Spennymoor, and it's raining. Norman Cornish is still talking about Spennymoor and about painting. He looks at the queue, mostly of young women. 'Les parapluies', he grins, and traces a pattern on the umbrella nearest him. 'Look. Look at that pattern the rain's made. Look at that petrol puddle on the road. Pure Renoir.'<sup>30</sup>



Figure 111  
Pierre-Auguste Renoir  
*Les parapluies*  
about 1881-1886  
Oil on canvas

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.,



Figure 112  
Norman Cornish  
*Girl With Brolly*  
Oil

Certainly Cornish's personality was interesting. One local journalist commented, 'Between answers, he will speak with the sometimes disturbing bluntness of the miner –Mr. Cornish had over 32 years in the mines –and give his opinions ("don't put this down" on newspapers, interviews, interviewers ("nothing personal mind")...' <sup>31</sup> This example suggests the control Cornish exerted within interviews. In a separate interview Cornish provides the interviewer with one of his classic quotes. Then 'He smiles. 'That's a good phrase, that last bit. Make sure it all goes down.'<sup>32</sup> However on a different occasion the artist seemed less than willing to co-operate. The *Evening Gazette* journalist reported, 'When I interviewed him in his small terraced house with his wife sitting quietly by, and admirable sketches of the children on the walls, he refused to commit himself to any more "quotations". <sup>33</sup> Cornish's character and his ability to reference artists, writers and to talk eloquently about his life was a factor which encouraged his popular appeal. The art critic W.E. Johnson noted how Cornish's Gala mural commission and his appearance on *Monitor* had made him a North East legend whilst 'Tom McGuinness, on the other hand, shy and retiring by nature, and considerably less fluent in explaining the message of his painting, has been shamefully overlooked.' <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>33</sup> *Evening Gazette*, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1963.

<sup>34</sup> *Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1963.

Cornish has carefully cultivated a successful media image over the decades. In emphasising his modest lifestyle, his commitment to his community and the pit, he portrayed himself as a normal miner from Spennymoor. This, however, is balanced with his artistic talent and his interest in art history. Cornish is particularly vocal in emphasising his self-taught education in an attempt to rebuff the wider uncultured representation of the miner. The two facets of his life are neatly combined in the sobriquet 'pitman painter.' However, this title was to become a source of increasing frustration to the artist as he made clear during interview in 1970.<sup>35</sup>

The commercial pressure upon Cornish was identifiable as early as 1970 and was exposed in a remarkable interview conducted by Gordon Burn. The printed article brought into question the portrayal of Cornish whilst also crystallising many of the tensions surrounding the media portrayal of the 'pitman painter'. 'Don't call me the pitman painter' was the bold heading in which Cornish declared he 'was fed up to the back teeth' with the title and its inferred meaning. Cornish elaborated on this claiming,

I'm sick of being looked at like some sort of zoo animal or specimen...You know the sort of thing...out of the depths comes this bloke and paints his pictures...It assumes that a man who works in a mine is not up to writing or playing music. But it simply isn't true.

This interview is the first clear articulation of Cornish's unease with his continued media presentation and the associated pressure of being the 'pitman painter'. Burn's response is equally enlightening as he writes,

But what's this? Pitmen don't say "one is conditioned." Pitmen don't use "one," in this sense. Their pronouns are direct, definite, unaffected things. You, Me, He, Him...anything but that upper-class, deep-south "one"...As carefully as he can Norman Cornish is telling me I'm wrong. Norman Cornish, painter, self-taught, is no primitive.

During the interview Cornish references Strauss and Gauguin, whilst also drawing analogies between pit pulley wheels and windmills in early Dutch landscapes. This, however, is not what Burn expected or wanted. He starkly writes, 'I don't want to

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<sup>35</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 28th March, 1970.

hear this. Get him on to the poetic stuff. Miners and mines. Open fires and tin tubs. Darts and dominoes.'

Even at the time, it was clear to Burn that the interview was not turning out as he had expected. The journalist indicates how he just assumed that he and Cornish were just 'going to hit it off from the beginning' because of their close geographic proximity and the shared cultural background it implied. That the interview did not go according to plan is of more interest. The exchange challenges many of the assumptions surrounding Cornish and the extent to which he deliberately but subtly attempted to counteract them.

In many ways this article marks a significant watershed in the artist's career. It marked a point at which Cornish slowly began to retreat from the commercial side of gallery life, ultimately resulting in a decade long absence from exhibiting which was brought to an end by the University Gallery in 1989. Burn's interview is suggestive of the wider cultural changes affecting Cornish at the time. Burn perceptively noted how Cornish was preoccupied with the fact that he had to live by his art alone. Cornish, he described was 'insecure' and 'finding life rather frightening.' More recently Cornish has articulated how his work captures his 'period of history' demonstrating 'how it felt to be alive from 1920-1970.'<sup>36</sup> Burn's interview is interesting then, because it demonstrates the complexities of the media reaction to Cornish but also because it suggests the impact of the changing landscape upon the artist's depictions in 1970.

Cornish's association with the Stone Gallery was marked by continuous media interest as well as a demanding exhibition schedule, both of which cemented his regional popularity. The previous chapter concluded that this association was mutually beneficial. However, for reasons which are not altogether clear, the relationship between Cornish and the Marshalls deteriorated before it officially came to an end in 1980. Certainly for some time prior to 1980, Cornish appears to have conducted sales from his Spennymoor home.<sup>37</sup> Cornish confirms both in interview

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<sup>36</sup> *Antique Dealers and Collector's Guide*, November 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Such an example is his portrait of Doctor Cecilia Corrigan, a Spennymoor GP which was featured in the *Northern Echo*. *Northern Echo*, 16 September, 1978.

and in his autobiography that he was feeling disillusioned with the commercial side of his career.<sup>38</sup>

### **Acknowledging industrial decline.**

Cornish's depiction of mining life represents community up until 1970. His failure to date pictures and his repetition of particular scenes gives his art a sense of fluidity. Any one scene can represent many decades without being precise to any. For Cornish to represent the decline of the mining industry, he would be forced to commit his work to a specific period and even event. Capturing decline would also alter the perception of his work. The principle which has guided and motivated Cornish is his ability to encapsulate the 'feel' of community and within Cornish's portrayal, community is a place which 'feels' good. It is about character, support and shared cultural patterns. The emotion and sense of 'feeling' which accompanied Cornish's work was highlighted by one journalist, 'you are there in the pub, feeling the warmth of the bar and of the laughter and the companionship. With Norman Cornish you can see and feel and almost touch the life on canvas.'<sup>39</sup>

Cornish's art depicts Spennymoor during the period of 1930-1970. In contrast his contemporary Tom McGuinness incorporates the decline of the 1970s and 1980s within his art. Cornish's self-imposed exile from the pressures of exhibiting during the 1980s is all the more significant when contrasted to the way McGuinness conducted his career. Between 1980 and 1989, McGuinness exhibited regionally (although not in Newcastle) as well as nationally when he participated in the NCB's *Coal- British Mining in Art*, 1983.<sup>40</sup> He was also fully committed to capturing the sense of decline which had more recently characterised the mining communities of the North East. This sense of decline is a theme which has never entered Cornish's work although he remains acutely aware of the disappearance of the traditional mining community. Cornish, like Chaplin, was concerned by the impact of change. However, where Chaplin allowed this to enter his writings, Cornish chose to ignore it

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Cornish, Spennymoor, January 2005 and Cornish, *A Slice of Life*, p.33.

<sup>39</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1992.

<sup>40</sup> McManners and Wales, *McGuinness*, p.154-155.



in his art. On the basis that, as he has always maintained his major interest lies with 'people, people, people' and that 'people never really change at all.'<sup>41</sup>

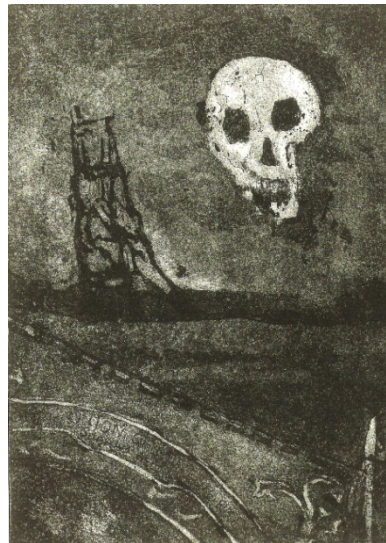


Figure 113  
Tom McGuinness  
*The Decline* 1986  
Etching

The theme of decline within McGuinness' work is noticeable throughout the 1980s and 1990s. At the time, McGuinness had been commissioned by St Mary's Church in Bishop Auckland to design a series of stained glass windows. The combination of personal bereavement and redundancy in 1983 resulted in a series of designs which combine religious imagery with references to the Miners' Strike. For example, a painting of the Garden of Gethsemane featured riot police as part of the depiction of betrayal. The image made a bold political statement. However, McGuinness withdrew the piece from the finished design.<sup>42</sup>

A sense of decline remained a strong theme within McGuinness' work and this is perhaps most vividly illustrated in his 1986 etching *The Decline* (figure 113). The image created is stark and haunting. The style of this work is replicated throughout McGuinness' 'Lost Generation Series' completed in the 1990s. This collection of work depicts the unemployed miners as 'wandering souls.' Critics have

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, May 2006.

<sup>42</sup> McManners and Wales, *McGuinness*, p. 19-21

compared the figures with concentration camp captives and this is understandable.<sup>43</sup> McManners and Wales perceive the miners to be returning nostalgically to the memory of the colliery. However, it is difficult to see how this interpretation is reached.

Reviewing McGuinness' 1993 exhibition the academic Stephanie Brown, contextualises his art in terms of proposed pit closures. She is the only reviewer to focus upon the harsh reality of the situation as opposed to nostalgically glossing over the economic changes. She uses both Cornish and McGuinness as artists who depict a community which was then under threat. In response to the recent proposal to close 31 pits, leaving 30,000 workers redundant Brown writes,

After surviving attack in 1984/5, miners again appeared an endangered species-a fact which added a sharp edge to the exhibitions, compelling viewers to regard familiar imagery with a new attentiveness, and with a continued uncertainty as to whether the subjects still related to contemporary life or had been relegated to history.<sup>44</sup>

The Miners' Strike 1984-85 was to have a devastating impact upon communities across the major coalfields of England, Scotland and Wales. Industrial tensions had characterised the political arena throughout the 1970s, yet they were to be overshadowed by the scale and complexity of the 1984-85 Miners' Strike which divided opinion and devastated communities.<sup>45</sup> The announcement in 1984 by the newly appointed NCB Chairman Ian McGregor of further pit closures provided the impetus to the year long strike.<sup>46</sup> The confusion and anger surrounding closures was understandable. In the case of Cortonwood mine, South Yorkshire, workers were given only five weeks notice of the pit's closure. The reason for Cortonwood's selection seemed unclear, especially as the pit was still economically viable according to the NCB. George Hayes, the South Yorkshire Coal Board Director

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 104

<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Brown writing for the 'Visual Arts Review' in *The Page*, February 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Trade disputes occurred in 1971-72 and in 1973-74, when Heath's government was brought down by the NUM in a disagreement over the 'Three day Week'. Further strikes in 1978-79 by local authority workers characterised the 'Winter of Discontent.' Taylor, A. (2005) *The NUM and British Politics: 1969-1995*, Hampshire: Ashgate, chapter two of this book deals with the role of the NUM in the disputes which characterised the early 1970's. Dorfman, G.A. (1983) *British trade Unionism against the Trades Union Congress*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, see chapter three, 'The Politics of Failure: The winter of Discontent 1978-79 pp 59-92.

<sup>46</sup> In the twelve months prior to the Strike the Coal Board had closed 23 pits, which equated to the loss of 21,000 jobs. Callinicos, A. and Simons, M. (1985) *The Great Strike, The Miners' Strike of 1984-5 and its lessons*, London: Socialist Worker, p.10.

claimed Cortonwood was closed because 'there was no future there, not because it was the most uneconomic pit in the area-it wasn't.'<sup>47</sup> By March, Arthur Scargill, president of the NUM, called for a national strike which was supported by mineworkers across the country.

According to Andrew Taylor, 'The strike was about a battle for the hearts and minds of the British people,' and the media was at the centre of the battleground.<sup>48</sup> The media coverage of the Strike has often been interpreted as 'vitriolic, prolonged,' resulting in a 'politicized media assault' on the miners.<sup>49</sup> The vilification of Scargill and the failure to accurately present the voice of the miner, whilst giving great emphasis to the NCB's version of events, have been identified as key components of the media's 'ideological policing of the strike.'<sup>50</sup>

The negative portrayal of the miners during these years directly inspired the nature of academic and visual accounts which aimed to defend the role of the miner. McGuinness' art attempted to portray the devastation experienced within mining communities. Likewise, photographers such as Keith Pattison attempted to capture the brutality of the police in contrast to the collective support within communities. His images of Easington during the Strike were widely exhibited at the time and some were featured in the 2006 *Making History* exhibition at the Tate Liverpool (figure 114 *Easington 1984*). The images are stark and poignant, with the visual decline in the industry matched by the sense of spirit within the community.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.10

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, p. ix.

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/makinghistory/catalogue.shtm>

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, *The NUM and British Politics*, p. ix.



Figure 114  
Keith Pattison  
*Easington 1984.*

In academic accounts objectivity is noticeably lacking in those written during the immediate aftermath. Geoffrey Goodman's *The Miners' Strike*, published in 1985, discussed the mining community in tribal terms seeing the event as a defence of 'their territory' whilst discussing the miners in terms of a 'special breed'.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons present their account from the viewpoint of the miners who they define in terms of 'heroism and determination'.<sup>52</sup> Accounts from the 1980s are distinguished by their emotional alignment towards the miners. Likewise earlier accounts tend to emphasise the solidarity and community spirit whilst neglecting the signs of decline. Bulmer's 1978 publication has been highlighted by Gary Pattison in *Restructuring Culture* as being an example of the latter.<sup>53</sup> This work featured a contribution from Sid Chaplin and depicted a particularly 'vibrant' mining community. The community it described was untouched by the obvious impact of decline. Naturally, the research is of limited use to an author such as Pattison whose primary aim is to consider more recent depictions of decline. However, the account presented by Bulmer's collected essays was particularly useful in understanding the more romantic notions associated with mining life as discussed in chapter two of this thesis.

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<sup>51</sup> Goodman, *The Miner's Strike*, p161.

<sup>52</sup> Callinicos and Simons, *The Great Strike*, p. 8

<sup>53</sup> Pattison, *Restructuring Culture*, p.52.

In terms of Cornish, his depiction of mining life remains akin to the vibrancy expressed within Bulmer's edited collection. That Cornish chose not to engage with the decline of the industry as many artists did, is in fact unsurprising. The Miners' Strike came at a time when Cornish was not actively engaged with the art scene. Even if he had been, it would have remained unlikely that he would have depicted the ongoing political debate. His reluctance to make any significant political comment is not unusual. As Gordon Burn noted when he re-visited the artist in 2008 as part of his non-fiction novel *Born Yesterday*, 'Cornish didn't want to talk Blair or politics. He wouldn't be drawn. Consider the implications of a telegraph pole, he said instead'.<sup>54</sup> Whilst Cornish came to be known for the 'nostalgic air' found within his art, critics knew that with McGuinness there would be 'no cosy reminiscences.'<sup>55</sup>

### **The University Gallery**

In 1989, the University Gallery staged a major retrospective exhibition of Cornish's work. The event coincided with Cornish's seventieth birthday and marked his first exhibition for over a decade. The exhibition attracted a huge amount of media attention and signalled the beginning of a particular phase within Cornish's career, in which the artist was characterised as capturing on canvas a 'vanishing world'.<sup>56</sup> Such sentiments were undoubtedly rooted in the bitter and dramatic decline of the mining industry during the preceding as well as the forthcoming years.

The exhibition marked the beginning of a twenty year association with the Gallery and a revitalisation of the regional appeal of miner art. The local media have and continue to play a vital role in generating interest in Cornish's career. The sense of nostalgia which is central to the media response is suggestive of an acute awareness of regional change. In 1992, *The Northern Echo* commented upon the historic importance of Cornish's work, 'And at a time when the North-East is changing, slowly but surely drifting away from its history and its traditions, fathers and sons should be grateful for Norman Cornish.'<sup>57</sup> Cornish's work is often viewed as a regional archive in which history is recorded. The local media draw on similar

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<sup>54</sup> Burn, G. (2008) *Born yesterday, the news as a novel*, London: Faber, p. 151.

<sup>55</sup> *The Page*, February 1993.

<sup>56</sup> *Northern Echo*, 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1992.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*,

analogies repeatedly when discussing Cornish's work. For example the world which was 'vanishing' for the *Northern Echo* in 1992 had actually 'vanished' in 2004. The content and emphasis in both articles is the same, Cornish was 'keeping alive a way of life' which no longer existed.<sup>58</sup>

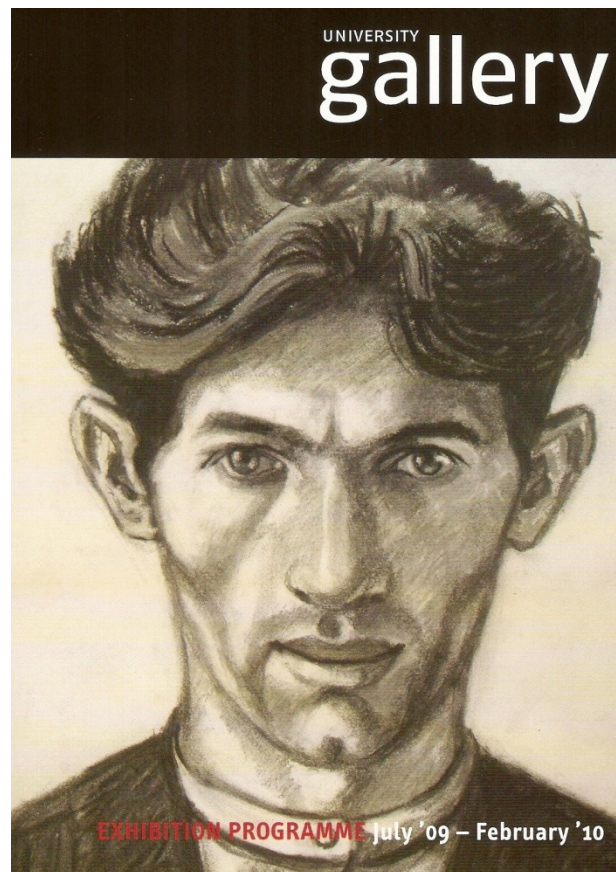


Figure 115  
University Gallery Exhibition Programme  
2009-2010

To a large degree Cornish's recent popularity is firmly rooted within a nostalgic interpretation of the region's past. The painting *Eddy's Fish and Chip Shop* was highlighted by the journalist Kenneth Roy in his regular feature which ran in *The Observer*. Roy asks, 'What has happened to England in the last 25 years? It has been wrecked and someone has got away with it'.<sup>59</sup> Cornish's work is used by the journalist as an example of a way of life which has now been destroyed. A series of similar headlines in various local newspapers also used Cornish in this way. His depictions of Spennymoor life were considered to reflect a more sociable and

<sup>58</sup> *Northern Echo*, 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1996.

<sup>59</sup> *The Observer*, 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1996.

friendlier way of traditional life not just within the region but nationally as Roy's article suggests. *The Northern Echo* ran two separate articles, 'When did we say goodbye to Mr. Chips?' which lamented the disappearance of Berriman's fish van. One of Cornish's paintings of the fish van was used to illustrate the article (figure 116 *Berrimans Fish Van*). A further article referred to 'Calling time on the British boozier.' A large Cornish bar scene accompanied this second article and illustrated how things used to be.<sup>60</sup>

The marketing of Cornish by the University Gallery aims to capitalise on the growing nostalgia which accompanies Cornish's work; 'For all that the mines have closed, his work continues to be an enduring testament to a community whose spirit survives triumphantly'.<sup>61</sup> In a pattern reminiscent of the Stone Gallery, the University Gallery frequently includes Cornish within their exhibition programme (figure 115 University Gallery Exhibition Programme). Without question he is its most popular exhibiting artist and also the most commercially successful. Cornish buyers hail from many parts of the country but his commercial success depends especially on the regional market, with collectors from Jesmond and Gosforth accounting for a larger proportion of sales.

The investment value of Cornish is an inevitable part of his current popular appeal. As Williamson writes, 'In the 'post-industrial, 'post-urban' North East, memories have become commoditised and turned to good business.'<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Cornish as a brand is reflected in the range of postcards, books, prints and posters. The University Gallery even produced a plastic carrier bag to accompany the 2005 exhibition, a move which inexplicably linked the artist exclusively with the Gallery. The current day marketing of Cornish might even, one feels impress the media savvy Marshalls.<sup>63</sup> Its success is firmly explained by the cultural interest expressed in the notion of a 'vanished' world. For middle class buyers in Jesmond and Gosforth, the

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<sup>60</sup> *The Northern Echo*, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1993. *The Northern Echo*, 4<sup>th</sup> August, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/universitygallery/cornish/?view=Standard>

<sup>62</sup> Williamson, *Living the past Differently*, p.154.

<sup>63</sup> Whilst the commercial aspect of the Gallery has been emphasised, its role in promoting a regional awareness in the value of art by miners cannot be underestimated. In 1991, the Gallery staged McGuinness' first one-man Newcastle exhibition. Extensive coverage of the McGuinness exhibition featured in the *Newcastle Herald and Post*, 20th November, 1991. The Ashington Group also exhibited here in 1996.



purchase of a Cornish allows them to own a piece of their long forgotten working class heritage. The feelings of warmth and community present within a Cornish provide audiences with a window to the past.



Figure 116  
Norman Cornish  
Berriman's Chip Van  
Oil

William Varley, the one art critic who had reservations about Cornish's work also appears to have mellowed somewhat in his views. Writing in the catalogue which accompanied the Gallery's 2005 exhibition, he hopes Cornish's work will live on as a '...vivid portrait of an almost vanished but in many ways better world', a world we should 'cherish'.<sup>64</sup> It is a sentiment which has inspired the creation of heritage sites such as the Woodhorn Colliery Museum in its present guise as Woodhorn Museum Archives and Country Park as well as Beamish-The Living Museum of the North where 'the bad old days become a bench-mark against which to measure progress and bask in the heart warming glow of the past.'<sup>65</sup> In 2006, Woodhorn received a grant of sixteen million pounds from the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is here that the work of the Ashington Group is safely stored for posterity. The popular appeal of these heritage museums is without question. However, their ability to present the past accurately is dubious. Williamson believes they present history through 'frosted glass' where 'Its shape is recognisable but the detail that matters is blurred.'<sup>66</sup> As with both examples, their primary aim is to attract visitors and portray a sense of how it felt to be alive during specific periods of the past. Historical accuracy

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<sup>64</sup> University Gallery,(2005) *Norman Cornish Paintings, Drawings and Sketches*, University Gallery Publications.

<sup>65</sup> Williamson, 'Living the past Differently', p. 156

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p154



is sacrificed in order to provide a sense of what it was like at the time. Certainly the Ashington Group have been subject of a revival in media attention courtesy of Lee Hall's play *The Pitman Painters*, 2008. This, it is argued, can be seen in the context of a wider national resurgence in re-examining mining life.

### **Cultural Renaissance.**

In September 2009, the British Film Institute launched the first instalment of its three year project aimed at celebrating the UK's twentieth century industrial heritage *This Working Life*.<sup>67</sup> The first instalment examined the coal industry through a variety of films many of them produced by the NCB's film branch. Indeed the title of the exhibition *King Coal* is taken from a short propaganda film produced by the NCB in 1948. The three minute film reflected the needs of the NCB to promote the industry and encourage recruitment following nationalisation.

The motivation which inspired the project reflects a change of attitude towards the legacy of the mining industry. Significantly, Newcastle born playwright Lee Hall was invited to give a special presentation in connection with the exhibition. The value and quality of the archive was demonstrated in chapter five through the analysis of Gala representations which revealed a fascinating and unique glimpse of the cultural change which influenced the event. Hall views the NCB collection as offering some valuable social lessons which extend beyond mere nostalgia,

The presiding image of these films is a joined up Britain: how the labour of one person serves the liberation of another. Sadly, it is a vision of a Britain long gone. Yet rather than seeming old fashioned or nostalgic, this vision seems remarkably grown up.<sup>68</sup>

At the time, Hall's plays *Billy Elliott* and *The Pitmen Painters* were running concurrently in London. Taken together, the BFI exhibition and the success of Hall's plays suggest a renewed national interest in mining communities. Cornish's latest

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<sup>67</sup> BFI web page [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk)

<sup>68</sup> *Saturday Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.

exhibition *Norman Cornish at Ninety* will also be shown in a London Gallery in March next year.<sup>69</sup> Commenting on this current renaissance of mining history, Hall writes,

That there is such an appetite to re-examine the legacy of an industry all but wiped out in a generation is a riposte to the orthodoxy that no one is interested in class, heavy industry and the progressive politics that informed so much of that industry's culture.<sup>70</sup>

The growing national interest in mining is reflected in the continuing success of Hall's plays. Receiving an Oscar nomination for his screenplay for the movie *Billy Elliott*, Hall's depiction of the miner's ballet dancing son has now been adapted into a West End show with music written by Elton John.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, his play *The Pitman Painters* based on William Feaver's academic account of the Ashington miners has received good reviews (figure 117 photograph Lee Hall's *The Pitman Painters*).<sup>72</sup> Rachel Cooke, reviewing the play on behalf of *The Observer*, was unable to resist the emotional appeal,

Hall can be sentimental, as anyone who has seen *Billy Elliot* knows. But here, sentiment is kept in check by political reality, raw as the Northumbrian wind. I almost lost it when, in the play's final moments, after the pit is nationalised, the cast sing "Gresford", the miner's hymn; I resented the lump in my throat like mad. But then there came one last, sick, Labour Party joke - I won't spoil it by putting it down here - that made everyone laugh above the sound of the colliery band, and I went out into the night furious and happy and almost too stirred up to sleep.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 117  
Lee Hall's *The Pitmen Painters*

<sup>69</sup> Kings Place Gallery is affiliated with the University Gallery. See the exhibition programme for Kings Place at [www.kingsplace.co.uk](http://www.kingsplace.co.uk).

<sup>70</sup> *Saturday Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.

<sup>71</sup> *The Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Both of Hall's plays are to be shown on Broadway. *Saturday Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> *The Observer*, 8<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2009.

The play was accompanied by an exhibition of the Ashington Group's work at the National Theatre. Critics applauded the 'nitty-gritty' depiction of community life.<sup>74</sup> Also present within reviews was an element of nostalgic indulgence when considering how 'the pinnied wife lovingly pummeled and shaped and baked the bread, week in, week out.'<sup>75</sup> In this case the reviewer's sugary gloss is not so dissimilar to Rachel Cooke's wild and romantic vision of the 'raw Northumbrian wind.'

Reviews of *The Pitman Painters* are significant because both regional and national critics share unanimous praise for the play. Hall's recent London successes can be contrasted with the difficulties faced by Chaplin throughout his writing career. *Close the Coal House Door*, received a somewhat mixed reception from national audiences when it transferred to the Fortune Theatre in 1968. The play was adapted from a story by Sid Chaplin. With music by Alex Glasgow and a script by Alan Plater, the play was directed by Bill Hays. The production received overwhelming praise from within the region when it was first shown at Newcastle Playhouse in 1968.<sup>76</sup> Despite 'rave' reviews in the North East, the play opened in London to small audiences that were characterised by 'Metropolitan apathy.' As a result the cast were forced to take pay cuts in order for the show to remain open.<sup>77</sup>

From the difference in reception stemmed a lengthy press debate which often touched upon the familiar concept of a North-South divide. John Higgins writing in the *Financial Times*, worried about the growing effectiveness of theatrical transplants arguing that what has 'flowered in the provinces' has 'faded in the metropolis'. This 'slice of regional drama' was not appropriate for 'sophisticated London taste.'<sup>78</sup> Other critics found the play which centred on the golden wedding anniversary of a couple and recounted various mining tales stretching between the years 1930-1960 as based on 'an embarrassingly naive and sketchy story.'<sup>79</sup> For other reviewers the plot was both boring as well as being irritatingly Northern,

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<sup>74</sup> *The Independent*, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>76</sup> Bill Hays Obituary in *The Independent*, 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2006.

<sup>77</sup> *Evening Chronicle*, 4<sup>th</sup> December, 1968.

<sup>78</sup> *Financial Times*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1968.

<sup>79</sup> *Evening Standard*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1968.

For adults, however most of it is a bit of a yawn, saved only by the Andy-Capp-type clowning of Brian Pringle and John Woodvine. The continuation of the three-act brown ale, folk opera, reveals that the twentieth century Utopia can be just as perplexing for the working chaps as in grandfather's day. Perhaps the coalhouse doors should be shut fairly smartly on this production before the fire goes out.<sup>80</sup>

The socialist content endeared the play to the *Morning Star's* critic who despite having difficulty with the accent, recommended it to readers.<sup>81</sup> The critic described it as a 'joyful celebration of the struggles and humanity of the British miner, symbolising the best in the long struggle of our industrial workers for a decent life and a better world.'<sup>82</sup> The generally poor response from London audiences offended Northern 'pride'. *The Northern Echo* hit back claiming the play was 'far-superior to much of the fare which normally gets served up there.'<sup>83</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed by *The Sunday Times* critic whose polemic claimed, '...if it had been put together by Southerners I tremble to think what scorn would have been poured upon it by those hard-hitting, strong-spoken, blood and bone and no-nonsense fellows up there.'<sup>84</sup>

The contrast between *Close the Coalhouse Door* and *The Pitman Painters* is significant. In many ways, they both express similar socialist issues and raise pivotal questions about the position and perception of the working class within society. The failure of London audiences to engage with these themes in the late 1960s is very different to the current success of Hall's endeavours. The wider national interest in the North East's mining communities has not remained consistent throughout the twentieth century. It is argued that whilst this occasional and sporadic interest has benefitted the career of artists such as Cornish it has not fundamentally defined his success.

If Cornish had never exhibited outside of the region or had not received the patronage of organisations such as the NCB, would his regional reputation have developed regardless? It would seem his regional popularity would have developed independently from external interest which is certainly indicative of the strength of

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<sup>80</sup> *Sketch*, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1968.

<sup>81</sup> *Morning Star*, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1968

<sup>82</sup> *Morning Star*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1968.

<sup>83</sup> *Northern Echo*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1968.

<sup>84</sup> *Sunday Times*, 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1968.

North East regional identity. Cornish has been careful to align his art with an earlier period where 'community' in its traditional sense was still in existence. The media have ensured that his vision of community is linked with wider perceptions relating to regional identity. Cornish's 'Northernness' expressed within his art and his lifestyle are fundamental when interpreting his regional success.

The impact of Cornish's depiction of Spennymoor has clearly influenced the artist Alexander Miller. Miller was born in Kilmarnock, West Scotland. In the late 1970s he moved to Newcastle where he found inspiration for his art. Miller explains 'I found Newcastle still had its fair share of characters known locally as 'Gadgies'.<sup>85</sup> These 'Gadgies' as Miller refers to them are reminiscent of Cornish's portly miners (see figure 119 *Jackie Broomfield* and figure 120 *Lanky and Shorty* for the similarities between the two artists.). Miller also draws on similar themes as Cornish depicting scenes such as *Gossips*. In 2005 Miller made a special appearance to Fenwick department store in Newcastle where many of his prints are sold (figure 118 photograph of Alexander Miller painting live in the display window at Fenwick Newcastle). During his visit he painted live from the display window of the store. It was an interesting marketing technique and one which demonstrates the increasing commerciality of popular art.



Figure 118

Alexander Miller painting 'live' in the display window of Fenwick department store.

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<sup>85</sup> [http://www.washingtongreen.co.uk/artists/alexander\\_millar/profile.asp](http://www.washingtongreen.co.uk/artists/alexander_millar/profile.asp)



Figure 119

Figure 119 Norman Cornish, *Jackie Broomfield*, ink and pen.



Figure 120

Figure 120 Alexander Miller, *Lanky and Shorty*, Giclee on Board.

### Conclusion.

The role of the local media within Cornish's career has been extensive. Its continuous support for the artist has enhanced his reputation to that of the supreme example of the 'pitman painter.' In Cornish, the press found an artist who was both talented but also had a bold personality to match. They present Cornish as an insider whose knowledge of the community allowed him to present mining life with accuracy and emotion. Journalists emphasise his dual status as both artist and subject. In Cornish's humble character they identify an essential 'Northernness' that was replicated in the community he depicts. For example, Cornish is seen to be straight talking, hardworking and despite his growing success, he remained loyal to his working class roots.

Industrial decline adds a further element to the understanding of Cornish's work. The nostalgic tone within journalistic accounts is matched by the reactions of visitors to Cornish exhibitions. That Cornish captures the past is important to people who want to reminisce over its disappearance. The local media reinforce Cornish's role as capturing the past by using his work to illustrate a 'vanishing world.'

It is interesting to note the difficulty in finding visual reminders of the industry which 'scarred' the local landscape. Lee Hall recalls, 'I remember driving around the Durham Coalfield trying to find locations for the movie of Billy Elliott, desperate to get a glimpse of an archetypal winding gear, and shocked to find they'd all been knocked down.'<sup>86</sup> Hall describes a process of 'cultural cleansing' that followed the 1984 strike in which the visual signs of mining were removed as well as minimising the role mining had played within the nation's industrial development.<sup>87</sup> However, it appears that in the changed landscape of the North East the process of cultural cleansing did not occur. The continued interest in art which used the mining scene as its subject and indeed the importance of the mining industry remained an integral part of regional identity within the North East, even when the focus of national audiences turned away.

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<sup>86</sup> *Saturday Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*,

## Conclusion.

This thesis has examined the factors which have established Norman Cornish as one of the region's most popular artists. The popularity of Cornish's work is demonstrated by its continued appeal to the local media and a certain local audience, both of whom embrace and value his depiction of the mining community. His success is highlighted by the regularity of his exhibitions and the commercial sales which characterise them. In understanding the artist's success, particular aspects of his work and career have been considered in the context of broader regional and national events. Central to this has been the importance of social and economic change and their influence upon notions of North East regional identity. The previous chapters have demonstrated that whilst Cornish has at times benefitted from the patronage of organisations outside of the North East, his continued success has largely been based on his appeal to certain local audiences. The sustained regional interest in the artist is underpinned by the extent to which a sense of 'Northernness' is detected within his work. More recently this is evident in a growing sense of nostalgia for a form of working class community life, which is perceived by many to have been lost.

From an early stage in his career, Cornish was frequently viewed as providing a realistic and authentic depiction of life in the North East. His perceived authenticity stemmed from the fact that, despite the quality of his work, he remained self-taught having never received any formal academic training. At the same time, however, his art offers something in its formal character and subject matter which reflects sophisticated and traditional depictions made by trained artists. Cornish's reputation and the validity of his work was strengthened by the fact that he worked as a miner and formed part of the community he painted. This encouraged the local media to see his work as a genuine and accurate depiction of working class life in the North East.

The way in which Cornish represented everyday life in Spennymoor also influenced his success. As chapter two discussed, the community that Cornish presented in his work has been a 'traditional' one in the sense that it incorporated notions of collective culture, solidarity and mutual support. Cornish reflects a wider



literary tradition in which writers, journalists and academics have sought to emphasise the homogeneity of the mining community. The appeal of his scenes to local audiences is indicative of a broader desire to reminisce over the 'traditional' community.

Cornish's subject matter incorporates many elements of mining life. He particularly champions the warmer side of life and reflects the simplicity and compassion of the people of Spennymoor. Pub scenes, street scenes and communal games reveal a warm, happy and collective community where people supported and cared for one another. The hardship of community life, is romanticised by Cornish. He acknowledges it but treats it with such care that critics and audiences feel compelled to respect and admire the miner and his family for their endurance.

In almost heroic scenes, Cornish's subjects battle to go about their everyday lives often in adverse conditions and under extreme pressure. Cornish's *Pit Road* with its long winding track reveals the daily walk of the miner often in the bitter cold under a dark sky. The figure is isolated, swallowed by the darkness around him. The viewer can do nothing more than respect his strength of courage. His wife Sarah is presented as a domestic angel and represents the embodiment of the ideal woman. She patiently and tolerantly completes her household chores, tends to her children, cares for her husband and selflessly maintains the family unit. The depiction of these individual acts are important and demonstrate how every member of the community contributes to the wider established patterns of work and domesticity. In his art, Cornish reinforces the gender divide identified within the 'traditional' working class community.

Cornish's regional success is largely due to his sympathetic depiction of mining community life. This depiction continues to attract widespread praise from regional audiences who lament the loss of the 'traditional' mining community. From the late 1970s, his work has often been used by journalists to depict a community which they perceived to be 'vanishing.' Pit closures, strikes and general industrial malaise were factors which informed this response. By the time of Cornish's retrospective exhibition held at the University Gallery in 1989 the mining community

had 'vanished'.<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, the media coverage of this exhibition reflected the growing nostalgia associated with the perceived loss of community. Cornish's more recent success can therefore be explained by his appeal to audiences who see his work as preserving aspects of a lost community.

In 2003, the University Gallery held the aptly named exhibition *A Shot Against Time*. The title of which derived from Chaplin's 1960 *Guardian* article. Chaplin, who had always demonstrated an acute awareness of change within his writing, noted how Cornish had 'recorded' the community around him.<sup>2</sup> He wrote, 'Soon the baby will be a small boy: he will change: a painting or drawing is a shot against time.' Clearly Chaplin recognised then, that Cornish's focus was firmly placed on capturing the elements of the community as they were, rather than as they were developing. Cornish's community 'exists' during the years of 1930-1970. Whilst Cornish continues to paint beyond these years, his work reflects this time period. Cornish therefore excludes the bitter political struggles of the seventies and eighties from his depiction of mining life. Instead his contribution to regional identity has been to depict mining life as he saw it existing, but also to preserve a sense of community which local audiences and particularly the media now believe has been lost.

This 'vanished' community has become the prerogative of the heritage industry. Cornish's position is interesting. Unlike other heritage ventures such as Beamish or the housing of the Ashington Group at Woodhorn, Cornish remains a successfully commercial artist. In many ways however, the discussion of Cornish's authenticity relates directly to aspects of the heritage industry.<sup>3</sup> Considering Cornish in this sense, Cornish offers local audiences the opportunity to purchase a piece of heritage as opposed to just viewing or experiencing it for one day. Sales are undoubtedly assisted by the local media's coverage of exhibitions and their continued claims regarding Cornish's authenticity and realism together with the addition of nostalgia once more playing its part.

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<sup>1</sup> Commercial interest from loyal patrons continued. However, the artist recognised the need for an agent to handle his work. Interview with Norman Cornish, Spennymoor, May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, P, (1985) *On Living in an Old Country The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, London: Verso, p. 20.

The potency of the visual image to convey a sense of 'Northernness,' has been demonstrated repeatedly by the media, writers and academics. The use of Bill Brandt's photograph *Jarrow Coal searcher* in 1947 by *Picture Post*, ten years after the image was taken, is one such example. It was used to illustrate the desperate conditions within the whole country as a result of 'The Big Freeze' that year, but it also demonstrates some of the lasting negative interpretations of the region. As discussed earlier, Russell's use of a Cornish image without any explanation is testimony to its powerful symbolism. The flat capped men and the whippet are components which confirm the 'Northernness' of the scene whilst also serving as potent visual elements which suggest a strong interplay between reality, stereotype and identity.



Figure 121  
Andy Capp Comic Strip  
[www.comics.com](http://www.comics.com)

The stereotypical embodiment of the North is immortalised in the cartoon character of Andy Capp (figure 121 Andy Capp comic strip). Created by Reg Smythe, a former postal worker, the cartoon first appeared in the *Daily Mirror* in 1957. For the first six months Andy Capp featured only in editions circulated in the North of England. Yet the universality and popular appeal of this stereotype meant it was not long before Andy Capp was unveiled to a national audience. Don Markstein describes the public response to Smythe's creation,

Early on, the *Andy Capp* strip was accused of perpetuating stereotypes about Britain's Northerners, who are seen in other parts of England as chronically unemployed, dividing their time between the living room couch and the neighbourhood pub, with a few hours set aside for fistfights at soccer games.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Don Markstein quoted at <http://www.toonopedia.com/andycapp.htm>

William Varley points out that Andy Capp would not have been 'so successful if it hadn't been rooted in reality.'<sup>5</sup> Vall takes the comparison further arguing that whilst Cornish's illustrative style invites comparison with Andy Capp, it is also possible that Andy Capp owes a debt to Norman Cornish. Significantly, Cornish was producing images of flat-capped men in bars in the early 1950s and thus predates the creation of Andy Capp.<sup>6</sup>

Various factors behind the development of Cornish's regional and national reputation have been considered within this thesis. Chapter four looked at the role of the NCB and their attempts to promote the modernity of the newly nationalised industry in 1947. Their patronage of industrial art and particularly of 'pitman painters' was part of a wider public relations strategy aimed at national audiences as well as employees. Cornish's initial artistic success at the Spennymoor Settlement attracted the attention of the NCB who found Cornish's art and more importantly his personality particularly useful tools in their promotional objectives.

For many of the reasons that the local media found Cornish appealing, so too did the NCB. Cornish was an articulate and talented miner, whose loyalty to the pit was endearing; he was an ideal ambassador for the organisation. In promoting Cornish, the NCB raised his national profile whilst confirming what his supporters within the region had long recognised. The NCB continued in its role as arts patron throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even when the industry was facing its toughest challenges. At this point however, Cornish's absence from NCB exhibitions is most noticeable. Correspondence reveals that sales for the artist at these exhibitions were poor, highlighting a distinction between Cornish's regional commercial success and the apathy of national audiences.

Within the North East, his reputation as a local legend stems largely from the subject matter of his art but also relates to the development of his media persona. As early as the Settlement days, Cornish was highlighted by the media as an artist who demonstrated talent but also possessed an understanding of the way in which the mining community functioned. Cornish was a miner and this added a degree of

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<sup>5</sup> Varley 'Norman Cornish From Spennymoor to Palookaville,' presentation notes.

<sup>6</sup> Vall, 'Cultural Improvers,' p. 9.

legitimacy and authority to his work. Cornish himself emphasised this aspect, claiming his insider knowledge of scenes and activities allowed him to capture the event with authority and authenticity. What is most remarkable is the way in which he appears to understand how the non-mining world wanted to view miners and the mining community.

The perceived social realism of Cornish's work touched on two key debates within British art during the 1950s which centred around a 'battle' between realism and abstraction but also between two forms of realism; 'Modernist Realism' and social realism. The leading critic John Berger aimed to establish a distinctively British vision of social realism. Cornish's inclusion in national exhibitions such as *The Coalminers*, AIA, 1950, *Realism in Contemporary Art*, CPGB, 1951 and finally the AIA exhibition *The Mirror and the Square* which occurred in 1952, enabled him to exhibit alongside some of the most influential artists of the day. The art historian James Hyman has written that by the late 1950s this debate was at an end; the battle for realism had been lost with the triumph of American Abstract Expressionism.<sup>7</sup> However, within the North East such changes in the wider art world appeared to go unnoticed and Cornish's popular appeal persisted.

The Stone Gallery years of the 1960s witnessed the continued endorsement of Cornish's realism whilst confirming his regional appeal. The frequency of his exhibitions, commercial interest and the overwhelming praise from local art critics were key factors at this point. All of them were underpinned by the support of local audiences who attended his almost yearly exhibitions, purchased his work and continued to read the increasingly repetitive newspaper articles written about the artist. As chapter seven discusses this phase is similar to Cornish's current association with the University Gallery. Exhibitions at the latter are staged on an almost yearly basis, characterised by commercial success, they continue to attract the interest of the local media.

Within the region, cultural change was aligned with economic development, but it was also a selective process involving the media, various institutions and the

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<sup>7</sup> Hyman, *Battle for Realism*, p. 208.

endorsement of the local public. As Judith Murphy concludes in her assessment of the second folk revival on Tyneside, 1950-1975, without the prior existence of a strong core regional identity, politicians and the media would have had less to draw on, making their attempts to influence culture more tentative.<sup>8</sup> Keith Wrightson, commenting on a period much earlier than the one considered here, summarises,

Regional identities, like other forms of social identity are 'neither remorselessly permanent nor frivolously malleable'. They are modified and reinterpreted over time 'as external events and internal realignments...encourage new understandings of collective traditions.' They change. But they do not emerge from a void. There has to be something to be worked on, and it is the making and remaking of those deeper 'collective traditions', the constituent elements of identity and the forces that shape and reshape them, that concern us here.<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, Cornish has retained his position as a regional success story but is also recognised by the media and a local audience as an artist who offers something to say about the cultural heritage of the North East. The nostalgic depiction of the 'lost' community finds life in his work enabling audiences to see the region's past and to reminisce about its history.

The importance of the media in cultivating Cornish's regional reputation cannot be underestimated. Throughout the thesis and particularly in chapter seven, the local media have been highlighted for their overwhelming praise and support of Cornish. It was the media that affectionately named him the 'Pitman Painter' and thus encapsulated his unique position within the mining community. It should be noted that the moniker was later to become a source of irritation to Cornish as it implied that a miner could not paint. Gordon Burn's article on Cornish written in 1970 is the only time the artist publicly disagreed with a journalist. Aware of the importance of his media profile, Cornish has always been astute in his response to media interest and has largely managed to convey himself as an educated articulate man whose modesty and continued loyalty to the pit is admirable.

In conclusion, Norman Cornish has been instrumental in the creation of his image. He has carefully managed the stereotypical image of the miner artist as a

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy, J.A. (2007) 'Folk on Tyne: Tyneside Culture and the Second Folk Revival, 1950-1975', Unpublished thesis, p. 345.

<sup>9</sup> Wrightson, K. (2007) Elements of Identity in the re-making of the North East, 1500-1760, in Robert Colls ed. *Northumbria, History and Identity 547-2000*, England: Phillimore, p. 127.

primitive naïf along with his own desire to represent himself as educated and articulate. At times he has been uncomfortable with the sobriquet 'pitman painter', however through careful self-management he has cultivated a position which embraces his mining background together with his role as an artist. In achieving this he has shown a great awareness of the diverse motivations which have attracted the attention of individuals, institutions and groups.

When William Varley considered Cornish to be a 'visual token' of regional pride he was correct in many ways. He, however, argued that Cornish would fail to find continued success simply because 'loyalty is not enough.' It appears, however, that the critic was incorrect in this respect. In short, there are a range of factors which account for Cornish's sustained regional appeal. Perhaps the most important of these is the local media who continue to support the work of the artist thus raising his regional profile. Journalists working for local newspapers have largely portrayed the artist in a positive light, emphasising his modesty and loyalty to the working class community. The manner in which Cornish depicts Spennymoor is another factor which has supported the longevity of his career. His ability to present a conservative and consoling image of mining life reflects the artist's own understanding of 'traditional' community. Cornish shows his mining community as being centred on notions of solidarity, support and shared outlook. In doing this, his work appeals to a particular local audience as well being useful to organisations.

The economic decline of the region has also encouraged a wider local interest in Cornish's mining scenes. The local media often use his images to illustrate a vanished world. Not only does his work provide them with an opportunity to indulge in nostalgia but it also allows them to express pride in the industrial heritage of the region. Cornish's mining scenes are essentially 'Northern' and for this reason they have cemented many of the wider perceptions relating to regional identity.

Beyond the region, Cornish has been unable to find favour with the London-centred art world. At specific points in his career, the artist has contributed to wider artistic trends such as the debate regarding realism in the 1950s. The interest expressed by the NCB may have spanned several decades but the commercial benefit of its exhibitions appears to have been limited. Certainly, Cornish's

participation in significant national exhibitions raised the artist's profile but it has not been possible to sustain a wider national appeal.

The divide between national and regional audiences points to some interesting conclusions in relation to the popular, commercial and critical success or even failure of working class artists. The scope for further research is clear. Where Cornish has failed to secure a national appeal, Lowry succeeded. Certainly there are wider opportunities for discussion relating to the national success of regional artists all of which require exploration. This in turn could shed further light on the development of regional identity and how various constructions are made to assume specific meanings in specific contexts.



Figure 122

*Norman Cornish in his Spennymoor studio.*





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## Appendix I

### Select Biography of Norman Cornish.

- 1919      Born November 18<sup>th</sup>
  
- 1933      Begins work at the Dean and Chapter Colliery.
  
- 1940      Work included in the Northern Counties exhibition, Laing Gallery Newcastle.
  
- 1946      First one man exhibition held at 'The Green Room', the People's Theatre, Newcastle.
  
- 1947      Work included in NCB exhibition 'Art by the Miner', Oxford St. London.
  
- 1948      'Art By the Miner' exhibition travels to Edinburgh.
  
- 1950      'The Northern Realists' Exhibition, Carlisle.
  
- 1950      Exhibits in 'The Coal Miners' AIA Galleries, Lisle St. London.
  
- 1952      Work included in the exhibition 'Contemporary Artists of Durham County' Shipley Art Gallery Gateshead.
  
- 1958      Invited to design banner for Westerton Drift Mine and Tudhoe Mill Drift.
  
- 1959      Appears in Tyne Tees production North East Roundabout. Interviewed by Valerie Pitts, the series was produced by H.K Lewenhak. For this show he was commissioned by Tyne Tees Television to produce a series of drawings to be featured in the programme 'The Burning Question.
  
- First one man exhibition at the Stone Gallery, Newcastle.
  
- Also exhibits in the Stone Gallery's 'Winter Exhibition' of the same year.
  
- Tyne Tees director George Black purchases a painting by Cornish.
  
- 1960      Matthias and son produce 'The Pit Road' as a print available to purchase. The print was advertised in the April edition of 'Coal'

- 1960 Matthias and son produce 'The Pit Road' as a print available to purchase. The print was advertised in the April edition of 'Coal' magazine.
- One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery opened by Sir James Bowman, Chairman of the NCB. The Laing Art Gallery purchases two works for their permanent collection.
- 1961 Tyne Tees production 'Your Kind of Music' produced by Peter Grant. Features the work of Cornish juxtaposed with those of Toulouse-Lautrec with music from the Northern Symphony Orchestra.
- 1962 One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery.
- Durham City Council commissions Cornish to produce a mural for the new County Hall building at Ackley Heads, Durham City.
- 1963 Cornish features in the NCB production 'Mining Review.'
- BBC production 'Monitor- Two Border Artists' directed by Melvyn Bragg. Cornish interviewed alongside Cumbrian artist Sheila Fell.
- 1964 One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery.
- Commission from the *Northern Echo* to produce a painting for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 'Industrial Review'.
- 1965 Featured in the Tyne Tees production 'The Richer Life- The Artist and the Region' alongside Gary Sergeant.
- 1966 Cornish leaves the pit work to become a full time artist, aged 47.
- One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery.
- Five works presented to Theresa Russell to hang at the Civic Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- The Tyne Tees production 'Close up on Cornish In Paris' follows the artist as he visits the French capital.
- 1968 One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery.

- 1969 One man exhibition at the Stone Gallery.
- 1970 Gordon Burn interview.
- 1973 BBC program 'A pitmen's Academy' written and directed by David Byrne.
- Fourteen images included in Chaplin's selection of short stories 'A Tree with Rosy Apples'.
- Melvyn Bragg interviews Cornish for a second time in the Tyne Tees programme 'In the Picture'.
- 1974 Receives an Honorary Master of Arts degree from Newcastle University.
- 1975 Cornish, Chaplin and McGuinness featured in the BBC's 'Omnibus' programme 'Shafts of Sunlight'.
- 1976 ITV's Lifestyle series 'The Shapes of Cornish' produced by Andrea Wonfor.
- 1977 Tyne Tees production 'Pitman Painter' also produced by Wonfor.
- 1988 Artists on Film, Cornish appears along with Sutherland and Spencer.
- 1989 Retrospective University Gallery, Newcastle.
- Launch of Cornish's autobiography 'A Slice of Life'
- 1992 One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.
- 1995 Honorary Doctorate from Northumbria University.
- 1997 Twenty works presented to the University Gallery's permanent collection.
- 1999 One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.
- 2003 One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.
- 2005 One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.

- 2006      One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.
- 2007      One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.
- 2009      One man exhibition held at University Gallery, Newcastle.

## Appendix II

### Categorisation of towns and villages taken from the 1951 County Development Plan.

#### Category A

Those in which investment of considerable further amounts of capital is envisaged because of an expected future regrouping of population, or because it is anticipated that the future natural increase in population will be retained.

#### Category B

Those in which it is believed that the population will remain at approximately the present level for many years to come. It is felt that sufficient capital should be invested in these communities to cater for approximately the present population.

#### Category C

Those from which it is believed that there may be an outward movement of some part of the population. In these cases it is felt that only sufficient capital should be invested to cater for the needs of the reduced population.

#### Category D

Those from which a considerable loss of population may be expected. In these cases it is felt that there should be no further investment of capital on any considerable scale, and that any proposal to invest capital should be carefully examined. This generally means that when the existing houses become uninhabitable they should be replaced elsewhere, and that any expenditure on facilities and services in these communities which would involve public money should be limited to conform to what appears to be the possible future life of existing property in the community.

Category D Settlements.

Category D settlements have been highlighted in red in order to demonstrate the number of communities affected by the proposals contained within the plan.

**Ryton Urban District**

Claravale, Ryton Woodside, Stargate, Addison D

Greenside B

Crawcrook, Ryton A

**Blaydon Urban District**

High Spen, Blackhall Mill D

Stella D

Blaydon C

Chopwell B

Barlow B

Winlaton, Rowlands Gill A

**Stanley Urban District**

Craghead, The Middles, Quaking Houses, Oxhill, West Kyo, East Castle, Flint Hill, White-le-head, Tanfield Lea, Hobson, Lintz, Causey New Row D

Dipton C

Tantobie C

Tanfield A

Annfield Plain, Stanley, Burnopfield A

**Consett Urban District**

Hamsterley Colliery, Westwood, Allendale Cottages, Derwent Cottages, Crookhall D

Pont and Bradley D

Leadgate, Medomsley B

Iveston B

Ebchester, Shotley Bridge, Benfieldside B

The Dene B

Delves, Consett, Blackhill A

**Lanchester Rural District**

East Hedleyhope, Hedley Hill, Cornsay Colliery, Hamsteels, Quebec, Peartree, Holmside D

Waskerley D

Burnhope B

Satley, Castleside, Maiden Law, Esh B

Langley Park A

Lanchester A

**Whickham Urban District**

Dunston, Street Gate, Byermoor, Marley Hill D

Swallwell C

Sunniside B

Whickham A

**Felling Urban District**

Bill Quay D

Pelaw C

Felling A

**Chester le Street Urban District**

Newfield D

Chester Moor B

Pelton Fell C (excluding Whitehill Est. A)

Chester le Street A

**Chester le Street Rural District**

Eighton Banks D

Fatfield D

Grange Villa D

Urpeth, Ouston, West pelton, Newfield, Claytonville and Blackhouse, Nettlesworth, Edmondsley

Waldridge D

Burnmoor C

Lamesley, Plawsworth B

Beamish, Kibblesworth, Harraton B

Birtley A

Pelton-Perkinsville A

Sacriston A

Great Lumley A

**NE Durham**

**Jarrow Municipal Borough and Hebburn Urban District B**

**Boldon Urban District**

Marsden D

Boldon Colliery B

East Boldon B

Whitburn A

Cleadon A

West Boldon A

**Washington Urban District**

Washington Staiths D

Springwell C

Washington Station B

Washington, Great Usworth B

New Washington A

**Houghton le Spring Urban District**

Penshaw Staiths, New Herrington D

Newbottle C

Fence Houses B

Houghton le Spring, Penshaw-Shiney Row A

**Boldon Urban District**

Middle Rainton, Low Moorsley, High Moorsley D

East Rainton, Easington Lane B

Hetton le Hole A

Sunderland Rural District

Cox Green D



Ryhope, New Silksworth, South Hylton, Castledown B  
West Herrington B  
Offerton A  
East Herrington A

### **East Durham**

#### **Durham Municipal Borough A**

#### **Brandon and Byshottles Urban District**

Waterhouses, New Brancepath, Broom, Langley Moor, Little Burn, Brandon Colliery, Meadowfield,  
Brownley Colliery D

Brandon Village B

Brandon, Ushaw Moor, Esh Winning A

#### **Seaham Urban District B**

#### **Durham Rural District**

Kimblesworth, Pity Me, Pittington, Littletown, Cassop, Shincliffe Bank Top, sherburn Hill D

Coxhoe C

Brancepath, Shadforth, Hett, Sunderland Bridge B

Bearpark, New Pittington, Ludworth B

Witton Gilbert, Framwellgate Moor, West Rainton, Carrville, Sherburn Village, Bowburn, Quarrington  
Hill, Kelloe, A

Shincliffe A

#### **Easington Rural District**

Murton, South Hetton, Easington Colliery, Horden, Blackhall Colliery, Hesleden, Station Town,  
Wingate, Wheatley Hill, Thornley, Deaf Hill C

Warden Law, Burdon, Seaton, Dalton le Dale, Hawthorn, High Hesleden, Shotton, Castle Eden,  
Hutton Henry, Sheraton B

Peterlee (No Category) Population will increase.

### **South East Durham**

#### **Stockton on Tees Municipal Borough A**

#### **Hartlepool Municipal Borough B**

#### **Billingham Urban District**

Belasis, Port Clarence D

Wolviston B

Cowpen Bewley B

Billingham A

#### **Stockton Rural District**

Urray Nook D

Hart, Elwick, Dalton Piercy, Brierton, Newton Bewlet, Thorpe Thewles, Whitton Carlton, Redmarshall.

Elton, Long Newton, Egglescliffe, Aislaby B

Graythorp B

Stillington B

Greatham, Eaglescliffe Junction A

#### **Darlington Rural District**

**Fighting Cocks, Neasham, Coatham, Mundeville D**

Low Dinsdale, Middleton one Row, Great Burdon, Sadberge, Barmpton, Bishopton, Great Stainton, Brafferton, Redworth, Houghton le Side, Killerby, Summerhouse, Denton, Walworth, Archdeacon Newton, Piercebridge, Low Corniscliffe, High Coniscliffe B  
Hurworth Place B  
Aycliffe B  
Merrybent B  
Hurworth, Dinsdale A  
Blackwell, Middleton, St. George, Heightington A  
Newton Aycliffe (No Category)

**Sedgefield Rural District**

**Metal Bridge, East Howle, Chilton Lane, Trimdon Grange, D**

Trimdon Colliery C  
Cornforth, Fishburn, Bishop Middleham B  
Old Stillington, Foxton, Mordon, Elstob, Bradbury, Mainsforth B  
Trimdon Village, Ferryhill, Chilton Buildings A  
Sedgefield A

**South West Durham**

**Spennymoor Urban District**

Byers Green C  
Tudhoe B  
Kirk Merrington B  
Spennymoor A

**Bishop Auckland Urban District**

**Newfield, Binchester Blocks, Coundon Gate, Lessingthorne, Coundon Grange, Witton Park D**

South Church C  
Escomb, Westerton, Middlestone B  
St. Helen Auckland and West Auckland B  
Bishopn Auckland, Coundon A

**Shildon Urban District**

**Eldon, Eden Pit, Brusselton, Fylands D**

Middridge B  
Shildon A

**Crook and Willington Urban District**

**Sunniside, Mount Pleasant, Billy Row, Roddymoor, Oakenshaw, Helmington Row, North Beechburn, High Grange, Page Bank D**

Firfree B  
Howden le Wear B  
Crook, Willington A

**Barnard Castle Urban District A**

**Tow Law Urban District C**

**Barnard Castle Rural District**

**Butterknowle, Morley, Howle, The Slack, Burnt Houses D**

Toft Hill, Low Etherley D

South Cleatlam D

Woodland, Copley C

Wackerfield, Hilton, Bolam, Staindrop, Ingleton, Langton, Cleatlam, Headlam, Little Newsham,

Winston, Stainton, Gainford, Whorlton, Eggleston, Middleton in Teeside,

Newbiggen B

Evenwood, Cockfield, High Etherley A

Hamsterley A

### **Weardale Rural District**

Lanehead, Hill End, White Kirkley D

Cowshill, Rookhope B

Wearhead, Ireshopeburn, St. Johns Chapel, Westgate, Eastgate B

Thornley, Edmondbyers, Hunstanworth B

Stanhope, Frosterley, Wolsingham A

### Appendix III

Survey of paintings, drawings, mounted photographs and similar works of art held in Hobart House c.1970s. TNA COAL 30/574.

Bissell	BW Miners in Gallery
Brett	BW Castle and Bridge
H.A Freeth	Griffith Thomas Colour Crayon
H.A Freeth	JTC Hall BEM water colour
W. Heath Robinson	5 Repro prints First Colliery
Gloria Stack	Cloth relief Miners/Colliery
Salvador Dali	3 Prints Kohle Heute Kohle Morgan Kohle Umbermorgan
J Horsfall	Deputy's Safety Lamp Oil Original print 1830 coal Exchange
Cyril Ifold	Mae Roer oil on board 1973
Cyril Ifold	Pit Pony Oil on Board 1973
Maurice Utrillo	Repro. Oil Continental Street scene
Maurice Utrillo	Surrealist Design print
Von Becke Collection	BW print Working/playing Hard
Von Becke Collection	BW Etching Germans Setting Props
J. Hilton	Opencast Site Watercolour
H. A Freeth	Portrait watercolour
H. A Freeth	William N. Blanning watercolour
H. A Freeth	Tynemouth Priory Chapel Print
H. A Freeth	Pair Newcastle Etching Print
H. A Freeth	Pair Dr. Syntax Prints
Wilfred Ball	River Scene Print Repro
W.L Wylle	River Scene Pen BW Repro
Arthur Turnell	Mountain Scene Pen BW Repro
Fred Stocombe	Woodland scene Pen BW Repro
J. Alphonse Brener	Church and Yard BW Print
J. Alphonse Brener	Old London Bridge Print
J. Alphonse Brener	Terre Novas de Sortee Print
J. Alphonse Brener	Industrial Plant Print
Norman Cornish	Colliery Row Oil
Wilfred G. Bligh	Winning Coal BW Print
H. A Freeth	Portrait Pencil
H.A Freeth	John Atkinson Robinson Colour wash
R. Leigh	Norton Colliery watercolour
H. A. Freeth	William Packer
J.A.H	Old Pit Head Buildings watercolour

Oliver Kilbourn	Salvage Drawers at Work Oil
W. Heath Robinson	4 Prints Pit Head The Pit A Busy Day in Wash Screening and Picking Coals
H.A Freeth	Samuel Cooksoon Shot Firer
A. Prior	Engine at Pittington Colour Etching
A.Prior	Whitwell Colliery Etching/colour
Paul Henry	In Conte Marra Watercolour
T.H Hair	Pelton Colliery
T.H Hair	Pemberton Main
T.H Hair	The Isabella Pit
Robert Wood	Woodland Scheme Repro. Oil
H.A Freeth	Miner watercolour
Vincent Evans	Derailed Coal Tram
H.A Freeth	Miner Pen Sketch
H.A Freeth	Portait Pencil
Harry Wilson	The Christmas Tree oil
George McClean	Bedside Watercolour
Norman Cornish	Interior
Norman Cornish	Pair Etchings Drops at Wallsend St.Hilda's Colliery South Shields
J.Block	Braze Nose College Print
Mrs. P. Thurtle	1977 Jubilee Celebrations at colliery Village Oil
Oliver Kilbourn	The Playground Oil
Fred Laidler	Shaft Men Oil
G. Blessed	Whippets Oil
H.A Freeth	Josph D. Ansell
Vincent Evans	At a Coalface
Donald A. Ottey	Pals BW
Wilfred C. Appleby	Birmingham University BW Etching
Donald A. Ottey	Wall Figure
Donald A. Ottey	Old Mecator Wall Map
L.S Lowry	Street Scene Repro
Howary	Sea Shore Scene Repro
Oliver Kilbourn	Station Bridge Ashington Oil
Oliver Kilbourn	Dawn Ashington Colliery Oil
Carlo Cora	W.V Shepard Crayon
H.A Freeth	Deputy Watercolour
H.A Freeth	Miner Watercolour
Tom McGuinness	Colliery Street Oil

H.A Freeth	Portrait Crayon
H.A Freeth	Miner Crayon
J.M.W Turner	Lake from Petworth House Repro
David Weston	L.M.S Locomotive Colour Print
G.Hector	The Deputy
H.A Freeth	Victor Maidment Pencil Sketch
H.A Freeth	Miner Watercolour
Nameless	Miner at Coal Face watercolour
Dennis Guddary	Croydon A Power Station Oil
David Carpivini	Coal Tip 1973 Crayon sketch
Tom Gourdie	Colliery Scene Watercolour
Tom Gourdie	Miner Drilling Raised Relief
Henry Moore	7 works by the artist
H.A Freeth	Miner Watercolour
H.A Freeth	Willaim E.Henstock Deputy
H.A Freeth	Carton Bestwood Staff
Calpe	Water Skier 1972 Repro
	Photograph Men talking to women
	Pair old County Maps
	Miner Cycling from Shift Repro Oil
Lyn Grainger	2 Seascapes
Lyn Grainger	4 Watercolours Exotic Flowers
Tom McGuinness	Miners Bus No.2 Oil
Tom McGuinness	Auckland Park Colliery
H.A Freeth	C.J.S Dickens Pen Sketch
Claude Monet	Cape of Antibes Repro
Claude Monet	Sailing Boat at Argenteuil
H.A Freeth	Old Miner at Home Pen Sketch
H.A Freeth	William Brumble Deputy Pencil Sketch
H.A Freeth	Castle Scene Watercolour
H.A Freeth	Drinks Early Mining BW
H. How	Surrealist Colour Print
H.A Freeth	Lawson Roper
Sybil E. Harrison	Rutland Border Oil
Phil ?	Floral Design, Surrealist Art
Atkinson Grimshaw	Custom House Liverpool Repro Oil
Rosamund Bonus	Surrealist Design
H.A Freeth	Herbert Humphrey Watercolour
M.Dubourg	H.M George III Returns from Hunting Engraved Print
Rembrandt	Turban Repro

W.H Cooper	Lake District Watercolour Repro
John Constable	Bridge of the Stour Repro
John Constable	First Colliery. The Pit Head The Pit
W. Heath Robinson	Screening/ Picking Coal
Cailebote	Place De Europe Repro Oil
Picasso	Vase of Flowers Repro Print
R.L Govan	Scale Elevation Off Shore Drilling Tower
R.L Govan	London Scenes
Edward Wesson	Landscape on Avon at Ringwood Repro
Adrian Hill	Landscape Repro
W. Lambert Bell	Harbour Scenes Pair
W. Lambert Bell	Mine Winding Early 19 <sup>th</sup> century Etching
Wendron Forge	Pit Head Etched Plate
Robert Dodd	A Collier Brig Discharging Oil
Oliver Kilbourn	Rainy Day at Ashington Co-op
Henry Perlee Parker	Pitman at Play
Tom McGuiness	Transfer Point Watercolour
Mary Louise Contomns	Four Miners Watercolour
T.A Holloar	Wilform Power Station Oil
Mary Louise Contomns	Gala Day Watercolour
Everhardous Koster	Sailing Barges and Ships in a Calm Oil
William Mitchell	A Collier Brig Leaving Maryport Oil
W.L. Wyllie	Black Diamonds
	Durham Cathedral Print on Linen
	York Minster Print on Linen
H.W	Seal Ink Sketch
Roland Hilder	Colliery Scene by Night BW
Thos. A. Scarfield	Seatin Sluice Watercolour Print
Thos. A. Scarfield	Sweeps/Coal Heavers Pair prints
Geo. Chapmen	Colliery Pit Head BW Print
Ed. W Cooke	Colliery Discharging Etching
Vincent Evans	At a Coal Face Oil
Vincent Evans	35 Original Cartoons
J. Berenger	Earl Derby's Stag Hounds Engraved Print
M. De Gallard	Futuristic Landscape Colour Print
W. Heath Robinson	The First Colliery Cartoon

Raymond Piper	London Scene Pencil Sketch
Unknown	Spaniel Dog BW Crayon
Camille Pissaro	Mr. Loveciennnes Print
Robert Morden	18" Print Map of Berkshire
F. Robson	Bow Church Cheapside
L.S Lowry	Hillside in Wales Print
R.Y Caurdson	From original in British museum
J.D Harding	Blyth Colour Engraving